

Buffalo Bill's Most Remarkable Story!

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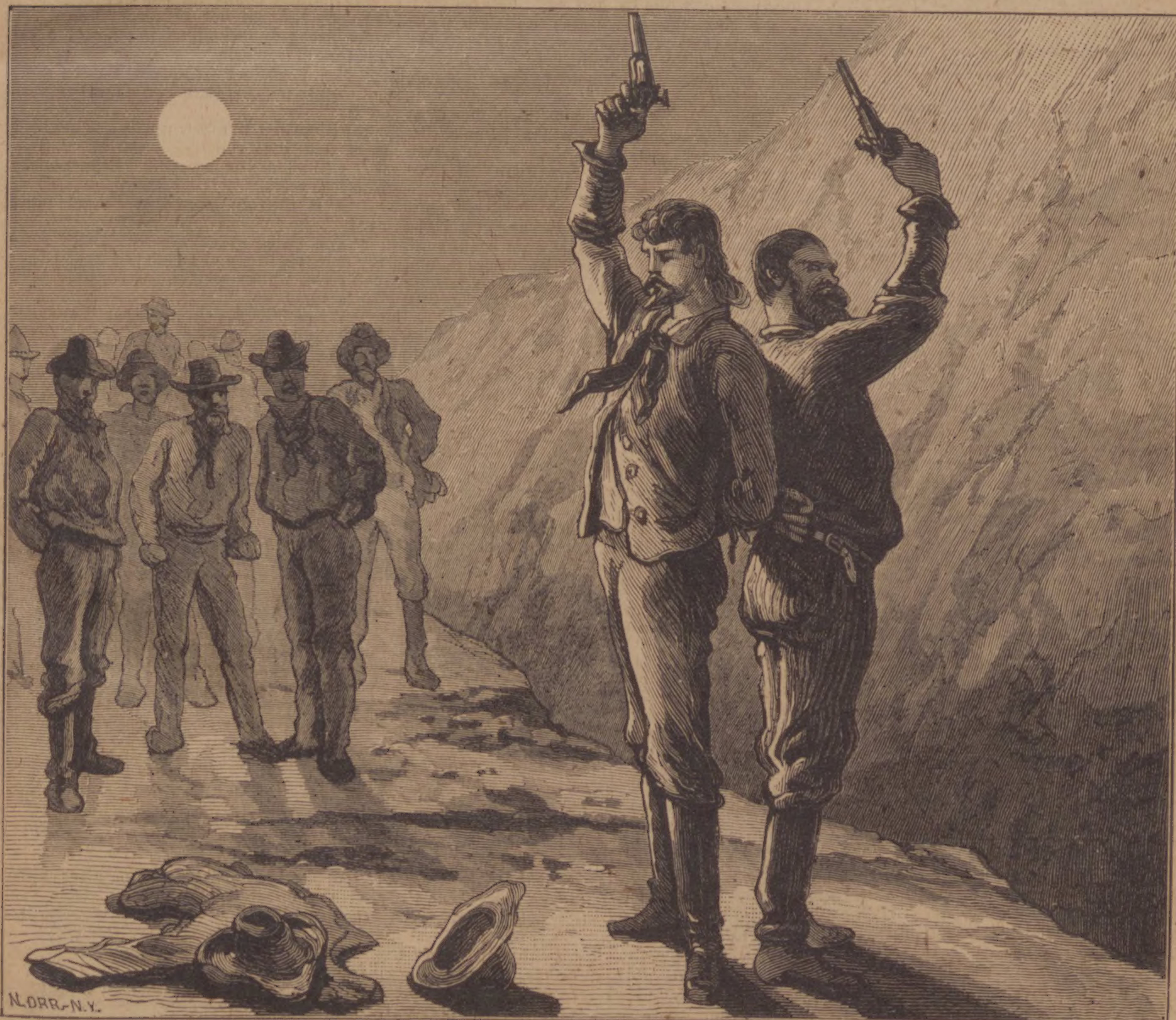
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BY BUFFALO BILL.—(Gen. Wm. F. Cody.)

WILD BILL, THE WILD WEST DUELIST;

Or, THE GIRL MASCOT OF MOONLIGHT MINE.



"READY!—RIGHT-ABOUT WHEEL!—FORWARD!—MARCH!"

Wild Bill, THE WILD WEST DUELIST;

OR,

The Girl Mascot of Moonlight Mine.

A Romance of the Outlaw Owls of the Rockies.*

BY BUFFALO BILL,

(Gen. W. F. Cody.)

LATE CHIEF OF SCOUTS, U. S. A., AND NOW
BRIG. GEN. NAT'L GUARD OF NEBRASKA.

CHAPTER I.

THE SCOUT'S THREAT.

"I DO not ask it, do not beg for an interview, but demand it."

"What! do you dare address such words to me?—you, a scout, and I a captain in the United States Army?"

"Yes, I dare address my words to you, Captain Adrian Valdos; I dare demand that you grant me a secret interview, either in your quarters, or at any rendezvous out upon the plains you may appoint, since it is of the utmost importance that I see you."

"Important to whom?"

"To me."

"And I refuse, while I shall report your insolence to Wild Bill, your chief, and also to Colonel Monastery, the commandant. I will not tolerate conduct from a man wearing buckskin, that a soldier dare not use."

"Bah! I care not what a soldier-slave may not dare do! As a scout, I have given you warning to meet me, and you can report me to Colonel Monastery, for you know as well as I do that Wild Bill, the chief of scouts, is now away on a secret mission of some kind, and he alone is my commander and superior."

"Go to Colonel Monastery, Captain Valdos, and I will have my story to tell, for I can take oath that, when you and I last met, we were on the trail across the Rio Grande into Texas, and while the men were killed or captured in the fight with Captain Canfield you—"

"Hold! Who in heaven's name are you?"

"I was known to you then as Fuentes, the Mexican; but now I am simply Kit Carrol, the scout from Texas."

"I never knew you as Fuentes the Mexican, and as Kit Carrol, the scout, you are insolent and presuming; but as men of your stripe are ignorant, I will overlook your behavior for this time, yet warn you not to repeat it."

"One moment, sir?"

"Well?"

"You know the Helmet Rock?"

"Yes, five miles from here on the river?"

"The same."

"What of it?"

"I will be there to-morrow evening at sunset, and expect you to meet me there."

"I shall not do so."

"Very well; be prepared to suffer the consequences, Captain—No, I will not speak the name here," and with a military salute the scout turned and walked away.

The two men were, as their conversation has revealed, a captain of the army, and a scout of the command at Fort Blank.

Both had the dark complexion and black hair that would indicate their nationality to be Mexican, though they spoke English with no accent, while their height and fine physique were far above the average of those of the race dwelling beyond the Rio Grande.

The officer was dressed in his fatigue cavalry uniform, which was becoming, for he was a very handsome man, with a face strangely fascinating, fearless and intelligent.

The scout was attired in buckskin leggings and hunting jacket, woolen shirt, slouch hat and top boots, and wore a belt of arms, with a repeating rifle slung at his back.

Meeting upon the parade ground of the fort, the officer had flushed with anger when the scout had confronted him and demanded, rather than asked for, an interview.

* This story, though a romance, has truth and reality for its foundation, for its scenes and incidents transpired in the life of my prairie comrade, Wild Bill—J. B. Hickok—when he was following a trail of death and mystery which he had given me his pledge he would track to the end.—BUFFALO BILL.

To an inattentive observer the meeting had been accidental, the demeanor of the man in buckskin polite, but their words were not overheard by any one.

When the scout turned away, he walked for some distance without looking back. When he did look he saw the officer still standing where he had left him and gazing after him.

"He will come; he dare not refuse!"

"If he be not the man I say, then is he his ghost, for there cannot be two so alike."

"I know that few ever saw his face in those days, but I saw it, and it is a face never to forget."

"Bah! I am a fool to doubt, for had I not struck the right chord in my accusation, he would at once have had me arrested—yes, dragged me himself to the guard house, for he is a man of iron, and strong as I am, he could easily handle me, and that is further proof that he is what I believe him to be."

"Why the whole circumstances of his coming into the army point to the truth of what I accuse him, and I need have no fear of his meeting me."

"If he does not, then I swear I shall bring him to dishonor and shame—ay, to the gallows, for it is in my power to hang him."

CHAPTER II.

A STRANGE COMPACT.

FORT BLANK was one of the most desirable forts upon the frontier, for it was delightfully located in the midst of beautiful scenery, surrounded by a grand game country and, though the hostiles were not far distant and gave considerable trouble, the garrison was strong enough to prevent any dread of serious consequences befalling the gallant men who held it against all dangers that threatened.

Colonel Mark Monastery, the commandant, was a strict disciplinarian, an experienced Indian-fighter and popular with men and officers alike, while he had with him his only child, Marcelite, a beautiful maiden of eighteen who had promptly won the title of the Belle of the Fort, though there were a number of other lovely maidens and matrons domiciled there also.

When ordered to report to his regiment at Fort Blank no man had greater claims to distinction and popularity than had Captain Adrian Valdos, "the handsome, dashing Texan" as he was often spoken of.

A Texan-ranchero, he had rendered most important service to the Government and the soldiers on the Rio Grande frontier, several times saving commands from massacre, and once being so fortunate as to be the rescuer of Colonel Monastery and his daughter, with their escort.

These gallant deeds had won for the Texan a lieutenantcy, while his after deeds had gained for him quick promotion to a captaincy, and it was whispered that he had won the love of the fair Marcelite.

But, in the midst of his fame there were several rivals of his at the fort who were glad to hear ugly rumors circulating about that he played cards like a professional gambler rather than as an officer and a gentleman should do; and more—dark stories were hinted at that his life as a Texan ranchero had been a lawless one.

Whether these stories reached the ears of Captain Valdos or not, he went on in the even tenor of his way with perfect unconcern, while Marcelite did not take any apparent notice of them, the colonel even treating them as the aspersions of disappointed rivals.

It was when these rumors were rife that the scout, Kit Carrol, had addressed Captain Adrian upon the parade-ground one afternoon, and boldly hinted that he held his honor in his hands.

After the scout had parted with the officer, the latter stood for a while with face alternately paling and flushing, and at last he mused aloud:

"I must know just what this fellow hints at, though it will look like a confession of guilt to meet him, after what I have said to him."

"Still, I cannot be indifferent longer to these rumors that are in circulation regarding me, so must at once crush them beneath an iron heel—crush them at all personal hazards."

"Could I only lay my grip upon one person who was at the bottom of them all, I would make an example of him that would deter others from pressing me too far."

"I half suspect Lieutenant Cameron Cole of being the instigator, notwithstanding he owes me his life, several times over; but then, he is madly in love with the fair Marcelite, and as jealous of me as a Moor."

"Yes, I must meet the scout, much as I dislike to do so; I must know what he dare accuse me of, then I can meet my other accusers by knowing just where to strike."

So mused the handsome captain, as he strolled leisurely over toward the colonel's quarters.

He gave the servant his name to bear to Miss Monastery, and the answer came that that lady begged to be excused.

"Say to Miss Monastery that at any other time I will accept her excuses, but just now it is important that I see her," he said with a smile.

The servant soon returned with the response that Miss Monastery would see Captain Valdos in a few minutes.

The officer smiled, slipped a fee into the servant's ready palm, and resting himself in an easy-chair, gazed complacently around the cozy parlor of Colonel Monastery's quarters, and which overlooked a grand view of hill and valley.

The rooms indicated a refined hand in the arranging, and though a frontier home, there were paintings, statuary and bric-a-brac visible, that made it most attractive.

Very handsome looked the gallant captain as he sat there, with not a shadow upon his brow.

Rising as he heard the trailing of skirts in the hallway, he greeted the "Belle of the Fort."

Marcelite Monastery certainly deserved the title she had won as a belle, for her form was faultless, graceful, willowy, her face the perfection of womanly comeliness.

She bowed coldly for one supposed to be the lady-love of her visitor, and said, in a voice strangely melodious, in spite of a certain tone of sarcasm:

"May I ask why Captain Valdos could not excuse me this afternoon when I requested it?"

"I came here to tell you why—to ask, why it is that you constantly put off the day that will make you my wife?" he responded, in a low voice.

"It is the old story that I must repeat again," she answered, impatiently.

"You twice saved my life, twice saved my father's life, and I believed that I loved you when I knew you as Adrian Valdos, the Texas ranchero."

"When I met you again as Lieutenant Valdos, an army officer, I felt that I was mistaken; but I promised you my hand, and I will one day keep my pledge, if you are not manly enough to release one who does not, cannot love you."

"But that day I will select in my own time, and, hoping that some fate may deliver me, I prefer to keep the compact between us a secret from all save my father, and my friend, Miss Turpin, who are aware how matters stand."

"I have answered you, Captain Valdos, so will you excuse me now? for really I am very busy with work that interests me."

"I will excuse you, Miss Monastery, now, but I still hold you to your pledge to one day become my wife, for Fate has so written it, and I am a blind follower of Destiny."

"Good-evening," and the captain bowed low, and with no trace of anger, only one of sorrow, upon his fine face, he left the parlor and wended his way to his own most comfortable quarters in "Bachelor's Row," as the quarters of the single officers were known.

CHAPTER III.

THE OFFICER'S DEFIANCE.

As he had decided upon, after parting with the scout, Captain Adrian Valdos mounted his horse the next afternoon to go to Helmet Rock the place of rendezvous.

Ostensibly he was going off for an afternoon's hunt, so was in hunting outfit and carried his Winchester along for big game.

He was acknowledged as the best rider at the fort, and sat his horse in a way that was

the envy of many a cavalryman, while he always rode the very finest animals that could be procured, the generous income he received from his Texas ranch enabling him to gratify himself thus, and in luxurious whims as well, which his brother officers, on their pay alone, were unable to enjoy.

He did not start toward the Helmet Rock, but upon a trail that would lead him there by a roundabout ride, and after several hours in the saddle came upon the spot of rendezvous with a deer hanging behind his saddle, a wild turkey and some smaller game, showing his powers as a hunter.

It was yet an hour to sunset, but he saw that the scout was before him, the latter's horse being staked out near, while the rider was stretched upon a blanket at the base of the rock, the peculiar helmet-like shape having gained for it its name.

The scout arose as the officer rode up and dismounted, and the latter said:

"Well, I am here, Carrol, so what have you to say to me?"

"I knew that you would come and I will not detain you long, for you will soon understand what my business is, and if you are wise, agree to my terms."

"Ah! more threats?"

"Oh no, not now, they will come later when you refuse, if you do, to do as I demand."

"Well, make your demands and you shall have my answer, when I will listen to your threats."

"What is your business with me, Carrol?"

"Gold."

The one word was emphatically uttered, and the scout looked fairly into the face of the officer.

The latter laughed, but replied:

"To get a loan you made all this fuss, then?"

"I have made no fuss yet, and do not wish a loan."

"What then?"

"I demand payment of you."

"I owe you nothing."

"You do."

"What for?"

"To keep my mouth shut."

"See here, Scout Carrol, I have been very patient with you thus far, submitting to your manner of addressing me and your threats; but I warn you that I will lose my temper soon."

"I do not doubt but that you would kill me, if you could, letting it be supposed that I had been shot by an Indian—"

"See here, man, I—"

"I came prepared, however, for treachery, for there are witnesses near whom you do not see."

The officer glanced quickly about him, and he felt that the nature of the surroundings of Helmet Rock would enable a score of men to lie in concealment.

As he made no reply the scout continued:

"When I came to the fort with a drove of ponies and herd of cattle, I recognized you, Captain Valdós."

"Well?"

"I was surprised, and then learned how it was that you had entered the army, so, as I was poor, and you were rich, I made up my mind that I would become a scout and in time make a demand upon you in payment for my silence."

"I got Wild Bill to take me on as a scout, and now the time has come for my demand on you for hush money."

"In other words you are after hush money?"

"I am."

"A large sum?"

"I want about ten thousand dollars, that is all."

"I will not pay you one dollar, though, for a moment, I was half-tempted to do so."

"You had better not resist the temptation."

"Oh, yes, I will, and I will tell you why."

"Why?"

"I was tempted, for the reason that I wished to shield from exposure one erring brother, one who went to the bad and for whom you mistake me."

"Ah!"

"He it was whom you were forced to guide in a raid into Texas, and who was known as Elmo, the Mexican."

"He it was who escaped when Captain Canfield, then, now Major Canfield at Fort Blank, killed, or captured his entire command."

"He always went masked so that even his men did not know him, though you doubtless saw his face, and hence mistook him for me, for we were strangely alike."

"But you have made the mistake, and I will not now be black-mailed into paying you money to be silent, to keep my secret of my brother's being an outlaw, so, Scout Carrol, go to Colonel Monastery with your story and tell him that he does not know me as I really am, but that you know me as Elmo, the Butcher, for his cruel deeds won him that unenviable title."

"You have my answer, Carrol, and remember, I shall no longer put up with your insolence, though I was weak enough for awhile to think of buying your silence, but upon second thought I defy you," and mounting his horse Captain Valdós rode away, while the scout muttered:

"He is Elmo, the Outlaw, and I will so inform Colonel Monastery."

CHAPTER IV.

AWAITING PROOF.

"COLONEL MONASTERY'S compliments, sir, and he wishes to see you at his quarters," said the colonel's orderly the day after the meeting of the officer and the scout at Helmet Rock.

The face of Adrian Valdós slightly paled at the words of the orderly, but he answered calmly:

"I will come at once, orderly."

Five minutes after he was ushered into the colonel's private office.

The latter was alone, his fine face stern, his eyes flashing, though he was calm and motioned the visitor to a chair, as he returned his salute.

"Captain Valdós, I have sent for you upon a most important matter, sir."

"I hope to allow me to command the force to be sent against the Sioux to-morrow, sir."

"I had selected you for that command, that is the advance, though Major Canfield will have charge of the reserve, and of course you would be under his direction; but the matter now is one of most serious aspect to yourself, to your honor and the good name of the service."

"Ah! then you have seen the scout, Kit Carrol, sir?"

"I have."

"He attempted to blackmail me, and though tempted, for the sake of one I love, though an erring brother, I was foolish enough to listen to his demands and submit to his insolence, I in the end defied him, and so he has doubtless come to you with his story."

"Yes, he has told me that which, if true, will blast you, yes, even worse, and dishonor the service of which you are an officer."

"Beyond doubt, sir, if true."

"I condemn no man unheard, Captain Valdós, and though of late I have heard ugly rumors flying around regarding you, as they took no official shape I did not notice them."

"But now a scout, or man whose character is good and services valuable, comes to me with a story which you must disprove, or I shall take official cognizance of it."

"May I ask the charges against me, sir?" calmly said Captain Valdós.

The colonel took a note-book from a drawer in his desk and glancing over it, said:

"The scout, Carrol, asserts that on a date here given, he was met by a party of Mexican outlaws that had crossed the Rio Grande and was made prisoner."

"They proved to be the band of Black Hats under Elmo, the Butcher, and he saved his life only by guiding them on a trail that they wished to follow."

"It was upon that same expedition that you, Captain Valdós, as a Texan ranchero, extricated Captain Canfield and his men from a trap, and enabled them to in the end capture the bandits, save their chief."

"Now this man Carrol asserts that though the outlaw chief was masked he saw his face on several occasions, and he makes the charge that you are not the Texan ranchero, Adrian Valdós, who was appointed to the army for the services he had rendered,

but that you are really Elmo the Mexican chief."

"That is about the report I supposed he would make to you, sir, when I refused to give him gold not to do so."

"How it can be I do not see, that you are other than you represent; but I wish your explanation of the mystery."

"It is easily made, sir; no not easily, for it causes me to tell of the disgrace of a loved brother, my twin brother, sir."

"You may not know that my early life was spent in Mexico, and though my father was an American, my mother was a Mexican."

"After my father's death, to get certain property from my mother, I, yes, both my brother and myself, took our mother's name and returned to Mexico."

"Poor Elmo went to the bad, brought disgrace upon our name and became an outlaw chief."

"I went to Texas and became a ranchman, dwelling alone, save my cowboys."

"You may recall, sir, when I led Captain Canfield to surprise the outlaws, my terms were the liberty of the chief, Elmo?"

"I remember it distinctly, sir."

"He was my unfortunate brother, and hence the demand."

"He returned to Mexico, sir, after I set him free, and afterward went to dwell among the Comanches."

"I received my appointment in the army, and now I am accused by this scout of being Elmo the outlaw."

"Colonel Monastery, you have my story, sir, my answer to the scout's charge."

"And a manly one it is, Valdós, and I honor you for your act toward your brother, sinful though he be."

"But let me tell you that it will be but a short while now before those who have heard those ugly rumors will do you justice, for I will confess to you just what I did, when I continually had to listen to stories against you."

"Yes, sir."

"At the suggestion of the department chief of scouts,* I secured the services of the head scout of this command, Wild Bill, James B. Hickok."

"Yes, colonel."

"Nothing whatever being known of your antecedents, Wild Bill started upon the trail months ago to unearth the mystery."

"And his report, sir?"

"He has not yet returned, but a courier came in from the south last night, and stated to me that he passed Wild Bill and a man whom he could have sworn was you."

"Indeed, sir?"

"Yes; but he had no word with the scouts but said they were on the trail to Moonlight Mine, where Mr. Turpin went, you remember, leaving his daughter here as my guest until his return, and I suppose the miner will come back with Wild Bill."

"Yes, colonel; but the man with Wild Bill?"

"I told the courier to say nothing of meeting the scout, and he will doubtless not do so; but as Wild Bill went south to clear your name, it is my belief that the man with him is none other than your unfortunate brother, the outlaw chief, whom he is bringing here as a prisoner."

"You have my sympathy, Captain Valdós, yet your name will no longer be tarnished, and brother though he be of yours, Elmo, the outlaw, certainly deserves the doom that awaits him here; but I see that you are disturbed, so come to-morrow and see me again."

"I am deeply pained, sir; but I beg of you to allow me to go upon this expedition to-morrow—it will keep me from thinking."

"Certainly, as you wish to do so."

CHAPTER V.

THE FATAL CHARGE.

So anxious was Captain Valdós to get once more the opportunity to distinguish himself, to wipe out all the cruel stories regarding him, and to have Marcelite Monastery regard him more kindly, that he asked Colonel Monastery to allow him to go on ahead with his command to reconnoiter well before the main force under Major Canfield should come up to make the attack upon the red-skins.

* W. F. Cody—Buffalo Bill."

Seeing that the story of the coming of Wild Bill with his brother, for who else could it be, and he a prisoner, doubtless, had greatly disturbed the captain, Colonel Monastery granted the request asked and the officer hastened to his quarters to prepare for an earlier start than had been intended.

Leaving the colonel to explain to Major Canfield, he had at once gone to the barracks and ordered the two troops to go under his command, with the two pieces of light artillery and half a dozen scouts to be ready to start by dawn at the latest.

Then he went back to his quarters and began to pace to and fro, his face stern, his brow clouded.

He sent an orderly to his lieutenants with orders, and though several officers, hearing of his going on the expedition, dropped in to see him, he refused himself to all visitors and continued to pace the floor of his little cabin, his brain and heart in a whirl at what he had heard from Colonel Monastery of the coming of his brother with Wild Bill, who had been sent on the mission, as had been confessed, of hunting down his, Adrian Valdoso's record, to discover if there was really just cause why he should be under a cloud with his brother officers, or it originated in the malicious hearts of his unsuccessful rivals.

The time of departure came and found Captain Valdoso ready, but he had not once closed his eyes, nearly the whole night being spent in that steady pacing to and fro.

Placing himself at the head of the troopers, who, with the scouts, numbered something over a hundred men, Captain Valdoso, an ideal soldier, rode out of the fort.

When the sun rose he saw ahead some distance and was surprised to discover that the scout who had been sent along in charge of the half-dozen other men in buckskin, was none other than Kit Carrol.

With flashing eyes he put spurs to his horse and riding to the front called out angrily:

"See here, Carrol, how is it that you have dared to come along as chief of scouts of my command?"

The scout saluted politely and replied:

"I came by order of Major Canfield, sir."

Captain Valdoso was about to make an angry retort, when he recalled that Kit Carrol was known as a splendid scout and that Major Canfield had sent him for that reason, he of course having no knowledge of what had occurred between them, so said:

"All right, sir, and see that you do not forget that I am in command here, even after your report to Colonel Monastery."

Then he wheeled his horse out of the trail and waited for his command to come up, while the scout went on his way amazed at the fact that the colonel had spoken to the accused captain of his charges against him, and then had sent him out at the head of the advance.

"I fear I have made a mistake," muttered the scout, and he seemed anxious to keep as far ahead as possible, so as not to be under the eye of the man he had failed to intimidate into paying him hush-money, or to disgrace by his charge against him.

Just before sunset that same evening, as the scouts were seeking a good camping-place, Kit Carrol sent back word that there was a large force of Indians in sight, several hundred in number.

Captain Valdoso's first duty was to dispatch a courier back over the trail to report to Major Canfield that the Indians had been met in force, and then ordering his officers to form in line of battle he rode quickly forward to reconnoiter.

A glance showed him that the Indians had just discovered their approach and were taken by surprise, for, in a valley, they were hastening toward the hill several miles away where they could make a stand.

"It will be ruinous to us if they reach the hills, so I will charge them now and fight it out in the open valley."

"Tell Captain Lane to bring up the men," he ordered, and in ten minutes more the troopers were stripped for the fight and ready for the charge, the artillery, scouts and pack-animals forming as a reserve in the timber.

Loud rung the command as Captain Valdoso placed himself at the head of the command,

and with cheers, clashing of steel and thundering of hoofs, a hundred horsemen were led at a run down into the valley.

Checked in their retreat, the Indians, four times the force of their foes, rallied to beat them back, and in ten minutes more the pale-faces and the red-men had met with a might crash, and a terrible hand-to-hand fight was begun.

But back the Indians were being driven when two startling cries were heard that sent a thrill of horror through the heart of every trooper.

"The captain has fallen!"

So rung the first cry, and all saw him torn from his horse where he had dashed far ahead into the midst of a band surrounding their chief.

"The Indians are reinforced!"

So rung the second cry, and down from the hill at the full speed of their ponies came a large force of warriors.

"Sound the retreat, bugler," reluctantly ordered Captain Lane, and the gallant troopers began to fall back from the bloody scene.

CHAPTER VI.

HIS FATE.

It was the order of Colonel Monastery, and the well-known push of Major Canfield, that prevented a very serious ending to the advance guard under Captain Valdoso.

The colonel, when he heard that the captain's command had gone off before dawn, had at once sent for Major Canfield and told him not to delay longer, as was the intention at first to start the following day, but to get off on the trail at the earliest possible moment, adding:

"Valdoso heard bad news last night, major, which I fear will make him very reckless of his own safety, and also of his men."

Under these instructions Major Canfield started with three troops, two more light guns, and left one more troop and a battalion of infantry to follow the next morning with the supply wagons.

He was therefore but a few hours behind Captain Valdoso in starting, and riding more rapidly than the advance, the courier sent back to hasten him on found him not two miles away.

At once he pushed on at a gallop, but before he reached the ridge he heard the wild, victorious shouts of the Indians rising above the roar of battle, and then followed the booming of the two guns left on the ridge, which plainly told that the troopers were retreating and hard pressed.

Dashing upon the ridge, a hundred yards ahead of his command, Major Canfield bit his lips as he beheld the cavalry retreating at a gallop, yet fighting as they came on, while behind them came a force now numbering seven to one against them.

He knew well that but for his coming they could not have rallied strong enough at the guns to check that horde of savages, and he quickly ranged his men in line, ordered the guns with him to take position and go into action, and as the flying cavalry reached the ridge, they beheld a support that would save them, and burst forth in a loud yell of triumph.

The cheers were drowned then by the rattle of carbines and the thunder of the four guns, and the avalanche of red riders met a check that pushed them back as though they had run at full speed against a precipice.

Having, when met by the courier, sent word back for the third force to hasten on, Major Canfield felt no dread of the numbers in front of him, yet cared not to send his tried troopers on a charge against them, leaving it for the four guns to stampede them by bursting shells. In their midst, for the sun was setting and darkness would soon envelop the scene.

The ridge where he had taken position was well supplied with grass, wood and water, and besides was a stronghold of defense, so he at once ordered the men to go into camp, and threw out his scouts to take in the situation, while he eyed the red-skins through his glass.

"There are some six hundred of them in sight, and more beyond the hills across the valley."

"Valdoso was rash to attack as he did, and he is fortunate not to have suffered more

from doing so," he said to the officers about him.

"Captain Valdoso has suffered all he can, Major Canfield, for he is dead," said Captain Lane riding up just then.

"What! Valdoso dead! this is terrible."

"Yes, he led the charge away ahead of the line, and I saw him dash into a group of braves surrounding the chief, and he must have been riddled with bullets and terribly torn with arrows and lances."

"I saw him fall, and made an effort to reach him, but the Indians were reinforced and we were beaten back."

"But for your timely arrival sir, I fear the rest of us would have been overwhelmed and shared poor Valdoso's fate."

A young lieutenant, a sergeant and half a dozen men had also been killed, and a score more wounded, so that a gloom fell upon their comrades at the result of the captain's fatal charge while Major Canfield muttered:

"It was just as the colonel feared: whatever it was that Valdoso heard, it had made him reckless of consequences."

"I wonder how Miss Marcelite will bear this news?"

The night passed away without disturbance, but the morning dawned to reveal the Indians in large force on the hills and in strong position.

Until the coming up of the third force Major Canfield dared not attack, for in all there he would have about four hundred men, and he sent a courier back to hasten them on in case the Indians, encamped by numbers, should attack him.

There upon the field lay the dead soldiers, the Indians having removed their slain; but an effort to reach them was met by the whole force of red-skins being put upon the move.

Thus the day passed, and with night the third force arrived and went into camp.

Before dawn Major Canfield moved against the foe, and the guns began to throw shells into the hills as they advanced.

But with the sunrise not an Indian was seen, and there lay the bodies of the soldiers, scalped, mutilated beyond all recognition, torn by coyotes during the night, a warning of what the soldiers must expect in frontier warfare.

The bodies were buried with honors, and the command then pushed on rapidly and brought the Indians to bay at noon.

But after suffering heavily the red-skins stampeded and the pursuit ended at night with victory for the soldiers, who several days after started upon the return to the fort to report the sad news of the killing of their comrades, and tell how gallantly Adrian Valdoso had died, seeming to seek death rather than shun it.

CHAPTER VII.

WILD BILL.

BACK came the gallant little force under Major Canfield, having won a victory far more important in its results than appeared upon the surface, for they had met the Indians upon their own ground, had headed them off in an intended raid upon the settlements which would have been fatal and destructive in its results, and beaten them back to their villages with heavy loss and completely cowed, at least for awhile.

The loss to the soldiers had been in a measure slight, in comparison to the good accomplished, for they footed up two officers and a dozen men slain, two score wounded and no prisoners to be tortured to death by the red-skins.

The loss of Captain Valdoso was most keenly felt, on account of his entering the army as he had and his gallant record.

That he might break the news gently to the one whom it was said he was engaged to, Major Canfield, himself a lover of Marcelite, and refused by her, though she regarded him with the highest esteem, appreciating his many noble qualities, had hastened on ahead as the command neared Fort Blank, to first see Colonel Monastery and make his report.

In a few words he told the colonel the results of the expedition, and that a troop, with half a dozen scouts and one gun, had been left behind to still keep the Indians awed, and he had returned with the main force and the wounded.

Then he told the colonel how true had been

his surmise that Captain Valdos would act nobly, adding:

"He planned well, sir, and was driving the Indians savagely when the reinforcements arrived."

"He gave the order to sound the retreat, fighting back, but discovering Mad Eyes, the great chief, he made a desperate attempt to kill or capture him."

"Whether he ordered others to follow him, or dashed alone upon the group, I cannot discover; but he shot and cut his way to the very side of the chief and there fell pierced by many bullets and arrows."

"Brave fellow, yet reckless."

"Did you secure his body?" asked the colonel.

"Not until the second day, sir, when I buried all those who fell, and a list of whom I have here, sir; but, the bodies had been cruelly mutilated by the Indians, even more so than by the teeth of the coyotes after they retreated."

"Captain Lane and Lieutenant Cole made desperate attempts to rescue Captain Valdos, but in vain, and I tried to secure the bodies the next day, but the red-skins moved out to meet me, and not having my third force near I dared not attack, so when we did get the bodies they were beyond identification."

"You have done all that could be done, Major Canfield, and deserve the highest praise."

"I will acquaint my daughter with the sad news of Valdos's death before she hears it from others."

"Pardon me, father, but I have heard all, for I confess to being an eavesdropper, as I was sketching in the next room when Major Canfield entered, and, anxious to know the truth I did not make my presence known," and Marcelite Monastery came forward and offered her hand to Major Canfield, who asked with some surprise at her calm manner:

"But, did you hear the sad tidings I bring, Miss Monastery, of Captain Valdos?"

"That he is dead, yes."

"He died as a brave soldier should wish to die, and it is better so."

Both the colonel and Major Canfield regarded her with surprise now, for her manner was perfectly unmoved.

"My child, I fear you hardly realize the sad situation, for you were the promised wife of poor Valdos, as I may say in confidence to Major Canfield."

"Yes, father, his pledged wife to fulfill a duty toward him, toward myself, though the love I had once felt for him, or rather for what I believed him to be, has vanished, yes, long ago."

"His death is a gallant one, and it sets me free, though I am deeply pained for him, his untimely loss, as I feel also for the others who fell by his side."

Calm, pale yet very dignified, very beautiful, Marcelite stood before her father and Major Canfield, her hands clasped upon the back of the chair she leant gracefully upon.

"If so you feel, my child, it is better that Valdos met the fate he did," said the colonel in a tone of slight reproach, and bowing in silence Marcelite left the major with her father.

After some further conversation together Major Canfield took his leave, and Colonel Monastery sat alone, buried in deepest meditation while the shadows of night darkened the room.

As the last glimmer of sunlight was fading away the orderly entered and said:

"The chief of scouts, Wild Bill, sir, has returned and begs to see you."

"Light the lamps and show him in at once, orderly," was the quick response.

A few moments after a man over six feet in height, of splendid physique and clad in buckskin, top-boots and dove colored sombrero, entered the room and saluted politely.

But Colonel Monastery stepped quickly forward and grasping his hand said earnestly:

"Wild Bill, I am glad indeed to see you back, and by a strange coincidence I have just learned of the death of Captain Adrian Valdos, who was killed a week ago at the head of his command."

"You are mistaken, Colonel Monastery, for Captain Adrian Valdos returned to the fort with me," was the scout's impressive response.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE STORY OF WILD BILL.

THE words of Wild Bill were misunderstood by Colonel Monastery, who said quickly:

"Then Valdos was not killed after all, and escaped from the Indians?"

"He did not escape, colonel, for he could not, but I rescued him."

"What? you have been then among the Sioux?"

"No, colonel, I am just up from Texas, and rescued Captain Valdos from the Comanches, though not by force of arms, sir."

"My dear man, we are both on different trails, it seems, for Captain Valdos was killed at the head of his command one week ago in a battle with the Sioux, and now you tell me he is with you, having been rescued from captivity among the Comanches."

"Ah! I understand now, sir, that the officer here, whose record you sent me to trail down has been lately killed?"

"Yes, exactly."

"It is well he has, sir, for otherwise you would have had to hang him."

"What do you mean, Wild Bill?"

"Simply, Colonel Monastery, that the one you have honored here is a fraud and not the real Captain Valdos, or rather Lieutenant Adrian Valdos, whom you had appointed to the army for valuable services rendered."

"You astound me, Wild Bill."

"I was myself astounded, sir."

"There is no mistake?"

"None, sir."

"Who then is he?"

"The one who is with me?"

"No, the one who was here."

"His name is Elmer Valdos, sir, once known as Elmo the Mexican Raider."

"Ha! that outlaw chief?"

"Yes, sir, the brother, twin-brother in fact, of Adrian Valdos, and so like him that no one seeing them together could tell them apart. By ambush, disguise and frontier detective work I have run him to earth, sir."

"Yes, Captain Valdos told me in confidence of this same twin-brother, told me how he had suffered through him, even to being mistaken for Elmo the Butcher."

"You have the outlaw chief with you, Wild Bill, and the real Captain Valdos has just been killed."

Wild Bill looked staggered for a moment at this, but rallied quickly and replied:

"Colonel Monastery, both Captain Valdos and I expected to find his impersonator here, sir, for I left him here."

"It is fortunate that he was killed, rather than live to be hanged, for his brother had consented to no longer attempt to save him from the punishment his many crimes deserve, as he has time and again."

"Where did you find the man you have with you?"

"In the main village of the Comanches, the prisoner of the old head chief, who had just died when I arrived, leaving my friend, for he is the one I found on the trail, with a wound that would have killed him, and took to the Valdos ranch."

"I remember, Eagle Wing, a young chief?"

"Yes, sir, now the head chief, and who at once set free Captain Valdos, who had been placed in the care of his predecessor as a prisoner, when the false Valdos came to the fort and claimed the rank offered to his twin brother."

"I am becoming more and more mystified, Wild Bill, but to your story."

"In a few words, sir, I went from here to the Moonlight Mining Camps, with Miner Turpin, and then on to Texas alone."

"I went to the Old Mission Ranch of Adrian Valdos to get the bottom facts of his record from the cowboys there."

"I got the truth from Rio Grande Ralph, the cowboy chief, that then boss had a twin brother, and who and what he was."

"He was the friend of the Comanches, who protected him in his raids for the plunder he gave them, and he was in the ranch the day Miss Monastery carried Adrian Valdos his commission, when under Major Canfield's protection on her way north to join you here."

"Yes, yes, I remember."

"The outlaw brother heard all, from his secret hiding-place in the Old Mission, for he was visiting Adrian Valdos there, and so

plotted to be the one to benefit by his commission."

"He left the ranch, went to the Comanche village, arranged with the head chief to keep his brother a prisoner, and when the latter started for Fort D—to report for duty, he ambushed him with half a dozen warriors and made him a captive."

"With his clothes, his papers, commission and money, he went himself to Fort D—and got orders to report here to you."

"He came in due time, and, a counterpart of Adrian Valdos, played his cards well."

"He deceived you all, and, a brave man, he even won promotion under false pretenses, while, not daring to kill his brother, he left him a captive among the Comanches, hoping he would die while in their hands."

"Forging his brother's handwriting, he wrote to Rio Grande Ralph and received his remittances from the sale of cattle and horses; in fact, he played his part so well that, if I am not greatly mistaken, he would soon have become the husband of your beautiful daughter."

"My God! Wild Bill, you speak but too truthfully, and from what a fate have you not saved my child—from what misery have you not saved me?" and the colonel was deeply moved.

After a slight pause, Wild Bill continued: "We secured the prisoner through Eagle Wing's friendship for me, went to the ranch for Mr. Valdos to recuperate, and then came northward, stopping at Moonlight Mining Camp with Mr. Turpin, who sends you this letter, and wishes his daughter to come there and join him, as he will be detained for some time, and I promised, with your permission, sir, to be her escort there."

"Certainly, but I fear Miss Sue will find it rough living there."

"Oh, no, sir, for Miner Turpin is comfortably fixed up, and you know her earlier years were passed in the mining-camps and she is used to it."

"You are right, and of course she must go; but now to the man you have rescued from a sad fate, the one you seem to justly claim to be the real Adrian Valdos?"

"He is in my quarters, sir, and I shall bring him here at your pleasure, sir."

"At once, and have Major Canfield come also."

CHAPTER IX.

THE CAPTIVE OFFICER.

COLONEL MARK MONASTERY confessed to himself, after the departure of Wild Bill to return with the one he had rescued from captivity that he had never been in such a quandary before in his life.

The officer who had been killed had confessed to him the erring of his twin brother, and this made the mystery more clouded, with the chances in his favor.

But then the nature of that same officer, after his coming to the fort, had seemed different from the Adrian Valdos they had known as the Texas ranchero.

In height, bearing, form, voice and face they were counterparts, so it was indeed hard to distinguish the fraud from the real, the outlaw from the honest man.

But the story of Wild Bill seemed to lend truth to the claim of the man whom he had rescued, and Colonel Monastery impatiently awaited his coming.

At last the orderly ushered in Major Canfield, Wild Bill and with them the man whom circumstances pointed to as the real Adrian Valdos.

Colonel Monastery greeted him, gazing upon him the while as though he were looking upon one raised from the dead, for, excepting that he was not in uniform, he was identically the one who had left his quarters some few days before to go upon an expedition from which he had never returned.

Major Canfield also looked upon the counterpart of the one he had known as Adrian Valdos, and the two could hardly realize that two persons could be so alike.

"My dear sir, I hardly know what to say to you, so thorough has been the deception of your brother toward us all."

"Have you been told of his fate?" asked Colonel Monastery, evidently embarrassed at the situation in which he found himself.

"I know only, sir, that he is here at the fort representing himself as Adrian Valdos, and I do not wonder that you have been de-

ceived, for the resemblance between us is startling."

"Mr. Valdos, your brother is not now at the fort."

"He learned of Wild Bill's trail after me then, sir, and has escaped?" quickly asked the officer.

"Yes, from stories that came to me, and a direct charge made by Kit Carrol a scout, that he was Elmo the Mexican outlaw, I was forced to take cognizance of what was said, and here in this room told him all."

"Then it was that he made known the fact that he had a twin brother, his very counterpart, who had caused him much sorrow by his evil deeds, and whom he tried to shield through all."

"It was then, believing his story, that I told him that a few days hence would reveal the truth of how he had been maligned, as I had sent Wild Bill to track down his record and I knew that all discovered by our friend here would be known, as he was then reported upon his return, bringing with him, as I believed, a prisoner, who could be none other, from the courier's report, than his wicked brother."

"He seemed deeply moved and urged that he might at once lead the advance upon an expedition planned by Major Canfield to give the Sioux a check, as they were then threatening trouble and needed a lesson, to teach them that we had an eye upon their movements."

"He left with the two troops and two guns, and—but it is not necessary to tell of the battle, only to tell you that in it he lost his life."

"Thank Heaven! that saved him from the gallows."

"But, Colonel Monastery," and the officer spoke eagerly, "who can vouch for it that he really died?"

"Major Canfield here, who buried his body."

"Was the recognition of his body undisputed?"

"Well, as to that the major must speak."

"I cannot say that it was, sir, for the Indians mutilated the bodies of all the slain almost beyond recognition, while the coyotes finished the work; but I buried the bodies I deemed to be Captain Valdos's and Lieutenant Scott's in a separate grave from the half-dozen men killed."

"Then you had no real proof?"

"No more than the height, and size of the body, which resembled that of Valdos, as well as the hair."

"Two officers were killed?"

"Yes, sir."

"And six men?"

"Seven others, Mr. Valdos, a sergeant and six men."

"Are you sure that there were nine bodies buried, Major Canfield?"

All started at the question, which the major answered:

"Well, as to the number buried I am not sure; but there were two officers, a sergeant and six men killed, and I supposed all were placed in the grave."

"Of course the Indians had stripped them, and there was nothing really by which to identify them."

"Do you recall any one now, sir, who could vouch for the burial of nine bodies?"

"I left Sergeant Dolan to bury them, while we pressed on to drive the Indians from their position, and fired a salute over the graves upon our return."

"May I ask if you will kindly find out from Sergeant Dolan just how many bodies were buried, sir?"

An orderly was at once dispatched for the sergeant, and when he came he would not be quite sure just how many bodies were buried, but all the slain were, and sent back to ask the men who aided him, he came back with the report that several said eight, the others nine.

"Pardon me, Colonel Monastery; for thus taking your time, but I am anxious to know that my brother was surely killed, for I do not, cannot believe that he was," said Valdos earnestly.

CHAPTER X.

A SECRET PLEDGE.

THE words of Adrian Valdos fairly startled Colonel Monastery and Major Canfield, and

set Wild Bill to thinking, for they were a surprise, and showed the reason for his close questioning.

"You surprise me, Mr. Valdos, by what you say," said the colonel, and he added:

"I can readily understand, also, when so many men were reported killed, and buried two days after, their bodies beyond recognition, that no count of the number placed in the graves was made, or even taken notice of."

"The sergeant does not recall, the men are divided upon the number, and you imply a doubt of your brother's death, though he was seen to fall from his horse in the very midst of the Indians."

"Would to God that he did so fall, that he was so slain, an honorable death thus meeting instead of an ignominious one, Colonel Monastery."

"But I know Elmer Valdos but too well, know his cunning nature, his indomitable will, pluck and power to turn defeat into triumph, and, going as he did into battle, with the knowledge that his betrayal was at hand, that I was nearing the fort, I can understand that he plotted some sure escape for himself."

"So became desperate, reckless, and chose to die in battle rather than at the rope-end," said Major Canfield.

"That is not my argument, major."

"What is, then?"

"That he was reckless, yes, desperate, yet determined to live for the sake of life."

"Evil as he was he loved life, and he plotted to save it though wishing to be believed dead."

"How could he?" asked the colonel.

"My good friend here, Wild Bill, will tell you that all tribes of Indians understand the sign language, though they cannot speak each other's tongues."

"Yes, that is known to me."

"They also have a certain secret signet among them, so to speak, a certain something that all understand, and which will ally them against the whites, their common foe."

"I was not aware of this, Mr. Valdos."

"Were you, Wild Bill?"

"Yes, colonel, yet I never met a white man who knew what this secret sign, or pledge was," answered Wild Bill.

"I have met the man, for my brother knows."

"Ah! he knows it?"

"Yes, Colonel Monastery, he was given it by the head chief of the Comanches, and he has, I know well, put it to the test among the Apaches, the Utes and perhaps other tribes."

"And do you know this secret sign, or pledge, Mr. Valdos?" asked Colonel Monastery.

"It is known, sir, only to the pale face that the Indians have the utmost confidence in, whom they believe is as one of their own race, and I never knew of but two white men who were thus trusted, my brother and one other, a Texan," was the evasive response, but the evasion of a direct answer was observed by Wild Bill alone.

"And do you consider this pledge, whatever it be, capable of being made in a fierce fight, where it would protect one from death at the hands of those whom he was fighting?"

"I do, colonel."

"How could it be made, or a sign be seen at such a time?"

"Perhaps it had been made before, perhaps the one who gave it was known and would thus be spared, sir."

"It is possible, yet not probable."

"But Captain Lane and others saw Valdos set upon, surrounded, fired upon and fall," urged Major Canfield.

"They were in the midst of a hot contest themselves, they saw him dash among his foes, and yet, though apparently harmed he might not have been."

"Then you believe, Mr. Valdos, that your brother, for upon that score there seems no doubt of his identity, had before met the Indians, made himself known by this secret pledge, or sign, you speak of, and could, in the end, in battle, allow it to be thought that he fell, covered with mortal wounds?"

"That is just it, sir."

"I can hardly believe it so."

"Do you recall that my brother made

trips away alone from the fort, being gone sometimes two or three days?"

"Often, for he was both a splendid scout and soldier as well, and has been off scouting a week at a time."

"I remember that fact also, and that several times he brought in valuable information," Major Canfield added.

"Or what seemed valuable, sir, but he always went alone, and you know I never brought in any reports of danger at the times he did, though you, Colonel Monastery, and Major Canfield may both recall now that whenever we really found and fought the Indians, I was the scout that brought in the tidings of their whereabouts, not Captain Valdos."

"I'll carry you out in that, Wild Bill, in the face of the facts," said Colonel Monastery, while the scout resumed:

"Pardon me, sir, for sounding my own praise, but I do so simply to show that when Captain Valdos went on scouts, and brought news of the Indians, nothing ever came of it, and it goes to show that his brother may be right after all in saying that he was the red-skins' friend secretly, for, as Elmo, the outlaw, he was bad enough to be anything."

"You are right, Wild Bill, and until I have found that my brother was actually killed in that Indian battle, I shall doubt it, and if he was not, then Colonel Monastery may expect to have a most dangerous foe now allied to the Indians to give him trouble in the future."

CHAPTER XI.

IN DOUBT.

THE strong belief of Adrian Valdos, that his wicked brother still lived, that he had not fallen in battle as all had believed, impressed both Colonel Monastery and Major Canfield as well as Wild Bill, who very quickly had decided that such a thing was possible.

As something must be done in the matter, of the return of the officer so long held in captivity, and kept out of his position by an impersonator, an impostor, Colonel Monastery said:

"Well, Mr. Valdos, it has been reported to me by Major Canfield, that your impersonator was killed, and I must so believe until we have proof that he was not, and which proof my opinion is he will take good care not to give himself, knowing the doom he must meet if taken."

"The question now is, sir, to make known your return, or rather your coming here to report for duty, and how you have been defrauded by your twin brother."

"Yes, sir, I am here to report for duty, according to my orders from the general, and to explain my not having done so before."

"Wild Bill has doubtless informed you that your brother was promoted for gallant services, to the rank of captain, he of course being believed to be you."

"Yes, sir, but I hold only the rank of lieutenant, and with it am content, though I shall hope to win promotion as he did."

"Well said, Lieutenant Valdos, and let me say to you that you need not begin your duties for a couple of weeks."

"Thank you, sir, but I am ready at any time."

"You will need to get your uniforms made by the post tailor, and fit yourself out, while you may take the quarters of your brother, if you have no objections."

"I have none, sir; but, may I ask, after being fitted for my uniforms, securing my traps and other necessities, if I may have a few days leave to go upon a special scout of my own seeking?"

"Certainly, if you so desire, but you do not know this country, yet, remember."

"A scout and frontiersman, sir, such as I have been, need not have to learn a country to be able to find his way about, and it is my wish to visit the graves of those who fell in the last Indian fight and count the bodies myself."

"Ah! you will still cling to that idea?"

"It will be better for me, for all of us, to know the truth, sir."

"Yes, it will be, and you can go, so just say how many men you wish to accompany you."

"Not one, sir, for he will be reported

dead, and if so, it will be best; but, should he not be, then it need only be known to you, sir, and those now present, unless it is forced upon us to reveal the truth by deeds which he may be guilty of as Elmo Valdós."

"You reason well, Mr. Valdós, and it shall be as you wish, for I am sure Major Canfield and Wild Bill will keep the secret."

"Both bowed acquiescence and the colonel continued:

"Now I do not like your going alone, for Wild Bill can accompany you."

"No, thank you, colonel, but I know that he is to guide Miss Turpin to her father's mine."

"If I mistake not, your trail will lead you for a day together."

"It will, colonel, from what I learn of the place where the battle was fought," said Wild Bill.

"Well, you can go that far with Wild Bill, and either overtake him and continue on to the mine, as an extra escort to Miss Turpin, or return to the fort, just as you please, but may I ask if you have any means of identifying your brother's body?"

"Do you observe that the small finger on my left hand has but one joint?"

All looked at the finger designated and noticed that it had but one joint from the socket.

"It is certainly so, and is a remarkable peculiarity I never met with in any one else," said the colonel.

"My brother is thus marked, Colonel Monastery, and his hand will reveal it, if he lies in one of those graves, and I will search each body for the proof."

"I believe you are wise in going, now that I know what proof you have, Mr. Valdós, whether your brother was slain or not."

"Now let me ask you, sir, if you are supplied with funds, and if I can serve you in any way?"

"Thank you, no, sir. I have ample money, for the timely arrival of Wild Bill at my ranch prevented my man there from sending off another remittance he intended to dispatch soon to my brother."

"Then, too, I have other funds and property he did not learn of, it seems, through some oversight of his."

"You are fortunate in that; but will you now meet my daughter, and Miss Turpin, who is here?"

"Thank you, sir, I have not yet gotten off the dust of the long trail we followed, so beg to pay my respects at another time," and the Texan bade the colonel good-night and departed, accompanied by Major Canfield, who was to show him to his brother's quarters, where he was to pass the night, politely declining the invitation of both officers to become their guest until he could get settled and feel at home.

The sight of the major coming in with Adrian Valdós, nearly stampeded the "striker" who had believed Captain Valdós dead and buried, but he was quickly rallied and told that the one who then appeared would be master of those quarters, though not until after the departure of the major and Wild Bill, when it was explained to him how it happened, did he regain his nerve and seem satisfied to remain.

CHAPTER XII.

A GIRL'S ROMANCE.

"WHAT a fatality has been mine," mused Adrian Valdós, as he was left alone in his quarters, after his talk with the man who had been the servant of his brother, and from whom he had gleaned much more information regarding his life and methods than from any one else.

He did not appear to care for sleep, but sat down at his brother's desk and looked over the letters and papers there.

Then he looked through his wardrobe and other things in his quarters until he had acquainted himself with all that was there.

Selecting a new fatigue suit which had never been worn, he put it on, and it fitted him to perfection, and his forage cap did the same.

There were new boots there also and these were equally as good a fit, so that when the striker came in the morning to awaken the officer he found him all rigged out and the very counterpart of his brother.

Major Canfield called to take him to breakfast with him, and, as the story had already gone the rounds of his arrival, and how he had been wronged, the officers at the mess gave him a most cordial greeting and he felt honored at his reception and touched by its kindness as well.

The major escorted him through the fort and introduced him here and there, taking him under his especial wing, while the colonel himself called upon him, inviting him to dine with him that day, an invitation that was promptly accepted, with an excuse for no better wardrobe than he possessed.

Major Canfield was the only other person invited to dine that day at headquarters, and he called for Lieutenant Valdós at the appointed hour and found him with Wild Bill as a visitor.

"I came to welcome the lieutenant, sir, and we have been talking it all over, so that in the future I feel he will have no more trouble," said Wild Bill.

"Yes, it is to be hoped so, for certainly you have had enough for one man, Valdós; but you are ready I see, to go to the colonel's."

"All ready, sir," and telling Wild Bill to call at his will, the lieutenant accompanied the major to headquarters.

The colonel was engaged in his office at the time of their arrival, but two more beautiful girls than the belle of the fort, and the Mascot of Moonlight Mine who welcomed them could not be found.

Their types of beauty were wholly different, Marcelite being a pronounced brunette and Sue Turpin a decided blonde, while the former's figure was slightly above the medium height, and the latter was *petite*, and both as graceful as gazelles, in their movements.

Sue Turpin's life had been full of romance, for the only child of her father, he had taken her with him to the mines, and as success fell upon him she had become known as "Beauty Blue Eyes," and was also called the "Mascot of Moonlight Mine."

When he had wedded the mother of Sue, Hugh Turpin found that his brother Jack, a rival in love, had become his greatest foe, and years after, when a desperado in the mining country, the disappointed man had sought his revenge in kidnapping Sue and carrying her away where all search for her proved in vain.

It was Wild Bill who came upon the desperado's hiding place in the mountains, and in a personal encounter killed "Black Jack" as he was known, and rescuing the young girl restored her to her home in her father's cabin.

Having found a fortune in the mines, Hugh Turpin went East with his daughter to have her educated, and several years after returned to look after his mining interests and dispose of them, bringing Sue with him.

The stage-coach in which they were passengers was held up by road-agents near Fort Blank, and once again Wild Bill was the rescuer, while with him was Major Canfield, who at once escorted the father and daughter on to the fort.

While Mr. Turpin went to his mines in New Mexico, Sue became the guest of Colonel Monastery and his daughter, and her beauty and lovely character won the hearts of all at the fort, while Major Canfield found in meeting her a "Balm in Gilead" for his wounded heart, hurt by the unrequited love he had felt for Marcelite Monastery.

So matters stood at the fort, when Wild Bill returned from his successful trail of running down the mystery of Adrian Valdós's life, and reporting that, as Mr. Turpin was forced to remain some time longer at the mines, he wished his daughter to come on and join him there, especially as her signature was necessary in the transfer of several mines that had been placarded years before in her name.

It was Marcelite and Sue then who met and welcomed Adrian Valdós when they arrived at headquarters, the colonel's daughter remarking, with no reference to the slain brother whose life had been so evil:

"I am glad to meet you again, Lieutenant Valdós, and to welcome you as one of us at Fort Blank, and you must be good friends also with my comrade, Miss Turpin."

Sue Turpin, thus introduced, offered her hand with a pretty little speech about girls

always being the friends of brave brothers, and then the four sat down for a general conversation until the coming in of Colonel Monastery whose warm greeting of Adrian Valdós convinced him that he had good friends at headquarters.

And so the dinner passed off delightfully, the ice was broken to Valdós's entrance into army life, and when the two officers took their leave Sue Turpin remarked:

"He is just lovely, Marcelite, but I cannot understand how Vice and Virtue can be such perfect counterparts as those two brothers."

CHAPTER XIII.

AN ENVIABLE SERVICE.

"WELL, Valdós, I envy you your first assignment of duty, being the escort of those two beautiful girls down to the mines in New Mexico."

So said Major Canfield, as the two officers entered the quarters of the major for a quiet smoke before retiring.

After dinner at the colonel's, it had come up in conversation about the going of Sue Turpin to join her father, for Wild Bill had brought her a letter as well as one to the colonel, explaining the need of her going.

Then it was made known that Sue had urged Marcelite to accompany her, for the two had become most devoted friends in the time they had been together, and fond of just such a trip as the long trail meant, the colonel's daughter had readily assented, providing consent could be obtained from the commandant.

The permission was asked at the dinner table, and Colonel Monastery had demurred, yet could not refuse to allow his daughter to go where he permitted Sue to do so, even at her father's request.

"My home will be like a howling wilderness, to deprive it at one fell blow of all its attractions, yet I suppose I cannot say no," said the colonel, and so it was decided that the two maidens should get ready to depart within three days.

It was also decided, after the colonel and Adrian Valdós had had a long conversation aside, that Lieutenant Valdós should act as escorting officer, to join them at their first night's camp on the trail, while Wild Bill was to go as scout and guide, with a sergeant, corporal and sixteen troopers as a guard.

In addition there was to be Marcelite's quadron maid, a negro cook and a couple of horse wranglers to look after the ladies' horses and pack-animals, for a complete camp outfit was to be taken along for their comfort.

Both the young ladies had been satisfied with this arrangement, as far as the officer in charge was concerned, but made no comment upon the fact that he was to join them the first night on the trail, and not depart from the fort with them.

They seemed to feel that both he and the colonel had good reasons for this arrangement.

In answer to the major's remark that opens this chapter, Lieutenant Valdós had replied:

"Yes, major, I am to be envied the pleasant duty, and let me explain to you why it was given to me."

"Only if you really desire to do so, Valdós."

"I do, indeed, for you have proven yourself a devoted friend of mine already."

"I have been only just and honest."

"Well, I like you for it."

"I suppose my being sent on this escort will anger some of the young officers, who would have been glad to have gone."

"Yes, especially Lieutenant Cameron Cole, who from the first, when you saved the command in Texas, has been apparently hostile toward you, though I believe the whole secret lies in his being jealous of the regard of Miss Monastery for you."

"She has ever been most kind when I have met her, and I owe my appointment, you know, to her father and yourself."

"You deserved it."

"But, Valdós, let me speak to you upon a matter that must reach your ears soon."

"Certainly."

"I do not know that you are aware, or not, that Miss Monastery was supposed to be engaged to your brother?"

"Wild Bill told me as much, and added that he was playing upon her kindness to me, in that she felt grateful to me."

"It was so, and it was a very peculiar affair all around, for I could not believe that Miss Marcelite really loved him. Yet, she was certainly under his influence."

"It was not for him she showed the same open-hearted friendship she had manifested for you."

"She was distant ever, yet made no effort to contradict the rumors that she was engaged to him, and that there was no love in the matter was shown when she learned of his death."

"Now, to be frank with you, Valdos, I loved that young lady devotedly, but finding she could not return my love, we became the warmest friends until now I find I made a mistake in my first love, for the fair Mascot of Moonlight Mine is now my *inamorata*, and I wish you to bestow only brotherly love in that quarter," and the major laughed.

"I will remember your injunction, major, but let me tell you that there can be but one love for a woman in my life and that I have already felt."

"Well, if you lean toward the colonel's daughter you will have rivals by the score, for now that Cap—your brother is dead, they will all go in to win for all they are worth, as outside of her beauty and lovely character, the fair Marcelite is an heiress to a very large fortune and the love of gold keeps pace with the love of woman every time."

"There is no doubt of that."

"You will find Cole first in the field, Captain Lane, and a score of others, from bald heads to cubs just away from West Point, but don't be disheartened."

Adrian Valdos laughed, and then suddenly becoming serious said:

"The colonel wishes me to start at dawn, day after to-morrow, for the scene of your battle, and open those graves, as it is my wish to do."

"That will give me two days for the work, and then I can head the party off their first night's camp from the fort, and continue on in charge of the escort."

"When I return I will be ready to enter upon my duties here at the fort."

"I am glad you are going, for it will be a respite for you, before duty here, and let those here talk themselves out regarding you, before your return."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE OFFICER'S LONE TRAIL.

WHEN Adrian Valdos departed upon his mission, while darkness yet rested upon the land, though the East was brightening with coming day, he went alone, a led pack-horse trotting along behind him.

He had firmly refused all offers of aid, saying that he preferred to go alone, and so had departed when only the guard at the gate saw him take his leave.

Obtaining from the post trader all that he needed for his journey, he had gone well equipped, having his camp outfit, a pick, spade, shovel and hatchet in his pack, with a repeating rifle, belt of arms and all that he would need.

He rode a fine animal that had belonged to his brother, and his pack-horse was also a good one from the same stable.

When the sun rose he was just disappearing from sight of the fort over a distant hill, and a few miles further on halted, staked his horses out and cooked his breakfast like one accustomed to just such a life as he had then entered upon.

He showed himself no indifferent cook either, for the coffee was good, the steak cooked to a turn, and the hoccake light and well-tasting.

Resuming his journey, he put his horses at a pace which, if kept up, would carry them many a long mile before night.

"You will have two days' rest before the others come along, so don't mind the hurry to-day," he said to his horses in an apologetic way, like one who wished not to be unkind without reason to a dumb brute.

He was following the old, yet well-marked trail, taken by Major Canfield's force toward the Indian country and back, and he appeared to follow it without the slightest

hesitation, like one who knew just what he was about.

At noon he again halted for an hour and a half, appeared to enjoy his dinner, and then pushed on at the same brisk pace as before.

But he seemed more cautious now, as though he knew he was getting into a dangerous land, where he might run upon a band of Indians at any moment.

He avoided clumps of timber, ridges and rocks, but still kept along as the trail went.

It was an hour before sunset when he ascended the ridge, where the troopers, under his brother, had made the fatal charge down into the valley.

There lay the valley before him, but not a sign of life was visible in it, only the scattered, well-picked bones of the horses that had fallen in the fight, both troopers and red skins.

Afar off, under a range of hills where glided a brook, was a clump of trees, where Major Canfield had directed him as the spot where the soldiers had been buried.

Right where he stood the trail divided, one going over the ridge down into the valley, the other turning to the left and following down the range of hills, while on his right was the clump of timber where Wild Bill would make his first night's camp with his fair charges, and there it was that Adrian Valdos was to meet them.

After glancing over the scene, as though he admired its beauty, Adrian Valdos rode down into the valley, marked the cut-up ground where the red warriors and pale-faces had met in deadly combat, passed among the scattered, whitening bones, and bent his way to the right to the clump of timber under the hill and on the brookside.

The sun was just sinking to the mountain tops as he dismounted in the timber, not ten paces from where there were two mounds, one like a large grave, the other as though it might cover half a dozen or more forms.

There was good grass back on the brook meadows, and here the horse was staked out in a bend.

Then the pack-saddle was opened, and rubber blankets, bedding, provisions, cooking utensils and last the pick and shovel were taken out and placed for use when needed.

The bed was first spread, then wood gathered for a fire, water brought in canteens from the brook, and as darkness fell supper was on the fire, the odor of coffee filling the air and mingling with that of broiling bacon.

Alone the officer ate his supper, and with apparent good appetite, though his glance was sad as now and then it rested upon the graves within the firelights glare.

He then arose, prepared as for a quick departure. If need came for it, watered his horses and staked them out near his camp, after which he scouted around the timber as though to see if there was any foe lurking near.

Returning to his camp he smothered the fire, and after standing a moment gazing down upon the smaller of the burial mounds, went to his blankets and turned in for the night.

If there were foes near they did not come to disturb his rest, and he did not appear to dread any grim specters, that might arise from the graves so near his resting place.

The night passed away, and the East was growing rosy when he arose, saw first to the comfort of his horses, made a scout around to see if any foe was near, and then returning to camp built his fire and cooked his breakfast.

This duty done he took up his pick and shovel and walking over to the smaller grave sent the sharp point deep down into the still soft earth and began the search for what the mound might reveal.

CHAPTER XV.

WHAT THE GRAVE REVEALED.

ADRIAN VALDOS had gone to the graves of the soldiers who had fallen in the Indian fight, with a settled purpose in view, to see if his brother was dead or alive.

Something within him impelled the belief that he was still alive, in spite of all circumstantial evidence that he was dead, had been seen to fall from his horse pierced by bullets and arrows.

Memory went back over the past, and re-

called the scenes of his brother's life and his, and all that had come to them in their years of boyhood, youth and manhood.

One had chosen the path of wrong, and yet the two had clung together in their affection for each other through all that had happened for good or ill for both.

They loved each other for what they had been in the past, and now that one was said to be dead, the other hoped that it was so.

He hoped so because he felt that he had, if dead, met a glorious death, when to live on would only be to die an ignominious one.

He hoped that he was dead, to spare any pain, sorrow and shame in the future, should he be alive, and more, become revengeful toward those at the fort who had been his friends.

If there were nine bodies in the graves, and one of them had the birth-mark of one joint only on the little finger of his left hand, then the truth would be known and the brother of Adrian Valdos be known to be dead.

Should these proofs not be there, then it would show that he was yet alive, and living was to be feared.

So, with strong strokes, Adrian Valdos sent the pick into the ground, loosening the earth, so that he could readily throw it out with the shovel.

Major Canfield had told him that the graves were some five feet deep, to protect the bodies from the coyotes, and across them many logs had been placed.

At last the shovel only was used, and the dirt was thrown out more gently until the steel touched the blanket that enveloped the dead.

It was a loathsome, painful work, but the man did not shrink from it but went on steadily until the bodies were exposed, all disfigured and revolting to the sight.

But Adrian Valdos was a man of iron nerve and nothing daunted he took up the left hand of each officer.

A moment he felt of the left little fingers, then he placed them back, folded upon their breasts as he had found them, and springing out of the grave began to rapidly refill it.

He had uttered no word, made no sign of his discovery until the grave was refilled, when he muttered:

"Now to the other, for, in the mutilated condition of the bodies, it may be that there was a mistake made, an officer being buried with the men."

So he set to work throwing out the dirt of the other grave, the long one containing the bodies of the men.

After an hour's work he knocked off, changed the grazing place of his horses, after watering them, made a scout around his camp to see if any foe was near, and then, as though not caring for dinner, returned to his work once more.

Digging hard he at last dropped his pick for his shovel and in three hours had the dirt thrown out until the blanket-wrapped forms were exposed.

Then, looking calmly down upon them, he slowly began to count:

"One! two! three! four! five! six!—"

He halted then, counted them over, got down into the grave and placed his hand upon each form separately.

But he could make only six, and the two bodies in the adjoining grave would make but eight.

"Two officers, a sergeant and six men were killed."

"I saw the list of names, and yet but eight bodies are buried here, six in this grave, two in that one."

"There is one body missing."

So said Adrian Valdos and to be sure he counted them over again.

He was sure but two were in the smaller grave, and he could also take oath but six were in the larger one.

One body was surely not there, for nine men had been reported killed.

Had one been only wounded and taken off by the Indians as a prisoner?

Certain that he was correct in the number that were there, he then began to seek for the test of the little finger, as to whether his brother lay among those dead or not.

Each left hand was raised, the finger closely examined, and then the hands were gently folded upon the breast once more.

At last the task was finished, and a sigh escaped the lips of Adrian Valdós.

It was a sigh of regret, for he had hoped to find his brother there, that he had met the death he was reported as dying.

But he had failed to find a body he knew to be his.

There were but eight bodies, and not one of these had the test of the single joint in the little finger of the left hand.

The grave had revealed the truth, carried out his belief that his brother was not dead.

Lured by the odor of the dead, a number of coyotes had gathered about, but as Adrian Valdós leaped out of the grave they scampered away.

CHAPTER XVI.

LIKE AN APPARITION.

ADRIAN VALDÓS had no dread of the coyotes, in fact he had hardly noticed their presence until he saw them dash away when he sprung out of the grave.

He was a little surprised that they fled so rapidly and went so far, but with a mere glance at them he took up his shovel and once more set to work.

The grave was yet to fill in, and the afternoon was waning.

Rapidly he worked, for he wished to get through in time to take a swim in the brook before sunset and then prepare his supper, for he began to feel the need of food, having eaten no dinner.

At last he threw on the last shovelful of earth, beat down the grave to make the mound solid, replaced the heavy logs along the sides and across the top, and then turned from his finished work just as the sun neared the distant mountain-top.

He was surprised to see that the coyotes had all gone, and having cleaned his pick and shovel was turning toward camp when even his iron nerves gave a twitch as he heard the words:

"Well, brother, you failed to find my body in the grave as you had hoped?"

The voice Adrian Valdós knew at the first utterance, and his eyes at once fell upon the speaker.

There, standing between him and his camp, like an apparition before him, stood a man in the fatigue uniform of a captain of cavalry.

He was the very counterpart of the grave-digger, the height, the weight, and in face and bearing.

In uniform as both were, it would be hard indeed for any one to say which of the two stood as a man of honor, or a man of crime.

Upon the face of one a look of intense sadness stole as he gazed into the eyes of the other.

Upon the face of the other crept a cynical, bitter look.

"So you came here hoping to find my body in that grave, Adrian?" repeated the one who had come like an apparition upon the scene.

"I confess it, yes."

"Then you wish me dead?"

"I wished that it might be that you had fallen as men told me you had, like a good officer and brave man, and not live to die at the rope end, as certainly will be your fate, Elmer."

"Then you must have doubted my having been killed, as reported?"

"I did."

"Why?"

"Knowing you as I did, your many escapes, your daring, cunning and that the devil appears to be your patron saint to help you in your need, I felt almost assured that you had tricked your brother officers and men, and thus saved yourself."

"You reason well."

"But why should I?"

"You had heard of my coming to the fort and knew that your treachery must be known."

"Ah, yes, I left you in the Comanche village a captive—the chief proved false to me, his friend."

"You are mistaken, he proved true to you until death called him away, and Eagle Wing became the head chief."

"Your friend?"

"Yes, though I owe my rescue to one other whom you have cause to fear."

"Wild Bill the scout?"

"Yes."

"He rescued you?"

"He did."

"Why?"

"Alike as we are, counterparts in all save honor, your career as my impersonator at the fort, soon put you under a cloud, and Wild Bill was sent upon the trail to hunt down my record, as it was believed."

"He did so, I suppose?"

"Yes, he did his work well, for he went to my ranch, and with Rio Grande Ralph took the trail for the Comanche village."

"The result is my presence here."

"And why are you here at this grave?"

"I came to see if you had really fallen."

"And sought for the unfailing proof which you and I both have" and he held up the little finger of his left hand.

"Yes, I found the proof missing, and it verified my belief in your being alive."

"And then?"

"How do you mean?"

"You went to the fort?"

"Yes."

"Were received with honor, made a hero of in fact, while I was dishonored though believed to be in my grave."

"I told the truth, Elmer, for it had to be known, and I took my place of course as an officer of the army; but the affair was hushed up as much as possible and only a curtailed report sent to the Secretary of War."

"You assumed the rank of a captain?"

"Oh no, I had not won that rank, so took my place as a first lieutenant only."

"Falling heir to my quarters, my clothes and all."

"Yes, I took your quarters, all in it, and your horses, for if you were dead I would be your heir, while you know there is a large sum due me by you, so I felt that I had a first claim."

"There is no doubt of that; but why is it that you are here alone on this funeral mission, playing grave-digger, when there are so many at the fort to have done the work for you?"

"How do you know that I am alone?"

"Because I have watched you since noon."

"I am cautious, you know, and did not care to put my head into a noose."

"It was I who frightened the coyotes away when you sprung from the grave."

"Yes, you are alone, and so am I, so we meet upon equal terms."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE FUGITIVE BROTHER.

THE words of Elmer Valdós, that they were alone and hence on equal terms, implied a threat, and Adrian so took it.

In digging out the graves he had placed his rifle and belt of arms on a tree a few steps away.

Between that tree and himself now stood the form of his brother.

But he made no effort to reach the arms, and simply replied:

"Yes, we meet alone, Elmer, and I am glad that it is so."

"You feel that you can best me then?"

"Oh no, for let me tell you that whatever your feeling toward me, I would not, even to save my life, raise my hand against my brother, you, my nearest kin, my boyhood playmate, one I have ever loved, tried to guide aright and sorrowed for your evil life."

"No, no, Elmer, I will be no fratricide, even to save my own life."

Instantly Elmer Valdós stepped forward and held out his hand, while he said in a voice that quivered:

"And bad as I may be, I could not take your life, cruelly as I have otherwise wronged you, Adrian."

Thus for a moment the two brothers stood, so alike in face and form, so unlike in heart and brain, both built in nature's noblest mold, yet one honored, the other dishonored.

Elmer Valdós was the first to break the silence, for he said:

"Why did you come here alone, Adrian?"

"I will tell you frankly, Elmer."

"I came here ahead of a party whom I am to escort to Moonlight Mining camps in New Mexico."

"I wished to know if you were dead, and in my heart I hoped that you were, for the sake of your future."

"I therefore came on two days ahead, leaving the post yesterday morning, and expecting to meet my party to-morrow night over yonder on the ridge."

"I came to open these graves and know the truth."

"And you do know it?"

"I do, for I see you alive, and apparently well."

"I never enjoyed better health."

"But when did you arrive at the fort?"

"I came with Wild Bill four nights ago."

"And how were you welcomed?"

"I went to the scout's quarters while he went to report our arrival to Colonel Monastery."

"Then he came for me, and Major Canfield was there also, and the whole story became known, the major taking me to your quarters and becoming my good friend through all, introducing me the next morning to the officers at breakfast in the mess."

"You met Miss Monastery and Miss Turpin?" asked Elmer Valdós, who was deeply interested in all that his brother said.

"The next evening at dinner at the colonel's, where I was invited with Major Canfield."

"You know that I had met Miss Monastery before?"

"Oh, yes, I remember; but not Miss Turpin?"

"No, though I met her father on my way to the fort, as Wild Bill stopped there on our journey."

"Now, what expedition is it you are honored by being sent upon when you are a new officer at the fort?"

"Colonel Monastery gave me a respite, before reporting for duty in the fort, so I was placed in command of an escort going to New Mexico."

"Indeed?"

"Hunting Indians, I suppose?"

"Oh, no."

"A large party?"

"A sergeant, corporal, sixteen men, Wild Bill, the scout, and six others."

"Who are the others, Adrian, for you must know that as I am now known to be an outlaw, and am a fugitive, I am naturally anxious."

"They are Miss Turpin, who goes to join her father, and Miss Monastery, who accompanies her as her guest."

"A pleasant service this you are on, Adrian, and one I envy you; but alas! there is no more joy in life for me."

"You have only to censure yourself that it is so, Elmer, and I pity you from my heart that such is the case."

"Yes, I always had your sympathy, your pity, yes, and I may add, for you were always generous, your gold as well, and heaven knows I need all now."

"What is it you intend to do, Elmer, for you know your danger in remaining here?"

"From your men?" quickly asked the outlaw.

"Oh, no, for, as I said, they will not be along until to-morrow evening; and I do not meet them here."

"From whom, then?"

"Do you wish it known at the fort that you are alive?"

"What does it matter to me?"

"Why then did you take such pains to make it appear that you had been killed by the Indian?"

"It is true I am an outlaw, a fugitive, a hunted man, and they will be upon my path the moment they know that I am not dead."

"You found friends among the Indians?"

"Oh, yes, for I had prepared for what came to pass, though I did not expect it."

"How prepared?"

"Well, I have a certain power that will befriend me with any tribe, and when alone on my hunts, I took the precaution to make myself acquainted with the Indians, so that they would know me."

"It seems that they did do so," dryly said Adrian Valdós.

"Oh, yes, for though I charged down on them, savagely, they knew me, and they supposed that I was only bringing grist to their mill, and so it would have been, had not Captain Lane retreated when he saw me fall."

"But I fell into the hands of my friends," and Elmer Valdós laughed loudly.

"Yes, I felt that it was so that you had

escaped, that the Indians knew you as a renegade to your own comrades.

"Are you with them now?"

"No, I am with you now; but I have friends not very far away, and I came down here to have a look at my grave, for it is an odd feeling, you know, for a man to look at his own grave," and Elmer Valdós laughed bitterly.

"Well, Elmer, I do not enjoy your humor, nor envy your conscience; but I would like to know what the future holds in store for you."

"Come, it is getting dark, invite me to supper with you and I will tell you," was the outlaw's reply.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE OUTLAW'S PLEDGE.

ADRIAN VALDOS glanced up at the gathering darkness, as though he had taken no note of time, in the interview he had just had with his brother, and in answer to his last words, said:

"Yes, Elmer, I will ask you to share my camp with me, for I cannot be inhospitable to you, and I look for no danger to you in doing so."

"No, I dread no danger, for, should any soldiers come it would not take me long to match them with warriors."

"Then there are red-skins near?"

"Within reaching distance, should danger threaten me," was the evasive reply.

"Are you mounted?"

"Yes, I staked my horse out yonder, out of sight of your camp."

"Fetch him and place him near mine, for I will change them to a fresh grazing ground, when I have watered them."

"I note that they are my horses."

"Oh, yes, I told you I fell heir to what you left."

"And you are to go back to a life of ease, luxury in fact, to honor, to win fame, to win the love of a beautiful woman whose fortune will be yours, while I am to be an outlaw still, an outcast, a fugitive," said Elmer Valdós bitterly.

"Get your horse, Elmer, and after we have had supper we will talk over what is best."

"I wish to take a plunge in the brook, change my clothes and I will feel better, for the work I have done to-day has been far from pleasant."

"I should think so," muttered the outlaw and he walked away after his horse, while his brother quickly changed his own to a fresher feeding ground and then took a plunge in the brook, throwing away the overalls he had worn while at work.

Gathering some wood then he soon had a good fire, his brother leaning against a tree and watching him, but making no effort to aid him.

At last the supper was ready, hot coffee, hockeak, antelope steak, bacon broiled on the coals, enough to tempt any hungry man.

Both ate with good appetites, the things were cleared away and lighting a pipe Elmer Valdós leant back against a tree and said:

"Now, Adrian, what is to be your future?"

"To try and win promotion and do my duty in life as I understand it."

"An enviable career for an honest man."

"Do not sneer, Elmer, for you had it in your power to become all that you wished, had you not chosen to blight your own and my life with shame."

"You drove me from the society of my fellow-men to seek a home in a wilderness, and there you came with your lawless band to prey upon those whom you mistakingly said owed you a living."

"You became a renegade against your own race, and when at last, by impersonating me, you entered upon what appeared a life of honor, you still clung to your evil, for you had the name of cheating at cards and of deeds a gentleman would blush to be guilty of."

"You sacrificed me to take my place, and yet you would not reform your ways, and sought to drag a lovely girl down to your level by making her the wife of an outlaw."

"You fled just in time to save your neck from the hangman's noose, and now that you live, and have it in your power to do so, let me beg of you to change your wicked ways."

Adrian Valdós had spoken warmly, and the outlaw had listened to him with a face like marble, making no reply, and seeming to be impressed by what he heard recalled of his criminal career.

When his brother paused at last he said almost savagely.

"Reform?"

"Yes, Elmer."

"Bah! how can I reform?"

"You are yet a young man, and crime and dissipation have not yet indelibly stamped your face."

"You are dead to the world, dead to those who know you, and by wearing a beard your face would be wholly changed, so that should any one knowing you once see you, they would never recognize you."

"You could change your name, blot out your past, strive for a new life, struggle to live an honorable career, and in time prosperity and honor would come to you."

"When you were sure of yourself, sure that you would not again drift to evil, that you had forever left the bitter past behind you, then you could win the love of some true woman, and in time have a happy home, only yourself knowing the stain of your earlier years."

"Why will you not do this, brother mine, rather than linger on here in this wild land, a renegade, a hunted man, the companion of savages, to in the end, die a death of torture and shame?"

"You preach well, and I would be converted, Adrian, only I am a beggar, with not a dollar to call my own, and I have nowhere to go."

"Would you, had you the means, Elmer, go far from here and begin life anew?"

"Gladly, for God knows I have no desire to be hanged, and that is what it will come to in the end."

"Elmer?"

"Yes."

"If you will give me your pledge, to be held sacred by the memory of our dead mother, I will write you an order for five thousand dollars I have in a New York bank, and will give you half of three hundred dollars I now have with me which will take you East."

"Will you give the pledge?"

"I will, and keep it, so help me, Heaven!" was the outlaw's earnest response, as he held out his hand to grasp that of the noble brother he had so deeply wronged.

CHAPTER XIX.

AT THE RENDEZVOUS.

"THEY are coming."

The speaker stood on the ridge which had been selected as the rendezvous where Wild Bill would meet Lieutenant Valdós, and he was gazing with his glass over the plain, where he had discovered afar off a mounted party coming along the trail.

They were yet half a dozen miles away, but were coming at a pace that would bring them to the ridge within an hour.

The spot chosen was a delightful one for a camp, as well as a safe one.

It was under the brow of a crag, from which flowed a spring clear and cold.

There were pines in plenty, and other trees, so that it was sheltered, while in a vale near the grass grew luxuriantly.

Having made sure that those coming were the ones he waited for, Lieutenant Valdós set to work and gathered wood to make the fire for the headquarters camp, which he had located apart, amid the pines, where the ladies would be secluded, and made other preparations for receiving them.

His own horses were staked out in the vale, and his own camping-place was near, for he had come there early in the afternoon.

The party had left the fort early in the morning, just as the sun was rising, and Colonel Monastery, Major Canfield, several other officers and several of the wives and daughters of those of the fort, had escorted them ten miles on their way, when a halt was made for breakfast.

All enjoyed the breakfast in the temporary camp greatly, and then the colonel and his party, with many good wishes, turned back for the fort, while the travelers continued on their way.

Wild Bill rode well in advance, his pierc-

ing eyes watching far ahead that he run not upon an ambuscade of red-skins, for well he knew that prowling bands might be met with at any time.

Then came the sergeant and eight men, with Marcelite and Sue Turpin following, and both splendidly mounted, and five horsewomen.

They wore short-skirted blue habits, trimmed with gold-lace, slouch hats with black plumes and gold cords. Marcelite's looped up with a small shoulder strap pin with the eagle, denoting a colonel's rank, in it, while that which ornamented Sue Turpin's sombrero was a gold pick and shovel crossed, indicative of her father's being a miner.

Each had a revolver in her belt, and to the saddle-horn of their saddle hung a small repeating rifle, as both girls were known as crack shots, and anticipated much sport on the long trail.

Behind them came Ellen, the maid, and the black cook sent along for the maidens, with the two horse-wranglers driving the pack-animals and extra horses.

The corporal and eight troopers followed these, while in the rear, some distance back, was Kit Carrol, the scout, who had made the charge against Captain Valdós, and who, upon the coming of the real officer, had been considered by all a man of very keen perceptive powers.

Such was the party that had started upon the trail, and after an hour's halt at noon, were approaching the place where they were to meet Lieutenant Valdós.

The sun was yet half an hour high when they came in sight of the timber, Wild Bill dropping back and pointing it out to them, saying:

"The lieutenant is there, for I saw him watching our coming—see, there rises a smoke, so he is building a fire to welcome you."

"I am glad to know that he is there, for I dreaded that he might have run upon a band of Indians," said Sue Turpin.

"Oh, no, miss, he is more capable of taking care of himself than any man I know of," was Wild Bill's answer, and he rode again to the lead.

The two maidens had been told by Colonel Monastery just why Lieutenant Valdós had gone on ahead, and he had suggested their not referring to the cause unless he saw fit to mention it.

They felt that his duty must have been a sad and painful one, and they sympathized with him in going alone on such a mission.

As they neared the timber he advanced into view and raised his hat, when the two girls gave him a military salute.

"Well, Wild Bill, you have arrived on time."

"I knew I could depend upon you," said the officer, and there was no trace upon his face of what he had passed through since leaving the fort.

"Yes, sir, and the ladies are here, as you see," answered Wild Bill.

Lieutenant Valdós raised his hat and said pleasantly:

"Welcome, young ladies, to my most desolate camp, for now it will no longer be very lonely."

He aided first one, then the other to dismount, and led them to the spot where he ordered their tent pitched for the night, while he said:

"May I ask Wild Bill to join our men on the trail?"

"By all means ask the splendid fellow," said Marcelite, while Sue added:

"Yes, indeed, by all means," and the lieutenant walked away to convey the invitation to Wild Bill, who was talking with the sergeant.

CHAPTER XX.

THE WHOLE STORY NOT TOLD.

"WILD BILL, it is the wish of our fair charges, as well as mine, that you join our mess upon the trail, for you are next to me in command, you know," said Lieutenant Valdós when the sergeant had walked away.

"I generally mess with my men, sir, but an invitation from a lady and a superior officer comes like a command, so I must obey," said the scout with a smile.

"Yes, obey, or be reported for insubordination."

"You are placing double sentinels I see?"

"Yes, sir, I thought it best for to-night, and I will make a scout around with Kit to see that there is no danger near."

"No need of it, for I have been over the field carefully."

"I saw some tracks back a mile, sir, crossing our trail, and there were all of a hundred of them."

"Yes, I tracked them over into the mountains this afternoon, so they have gone, and you can give the men all the rest they want, for there will be no danger, I vouch for it."

"That settles it, sir, for you know."

"Yes, I have been scouting most of the day, as I finished my work over yonder last night."

"At the graves, sir?"

"Yes, you can see the place where they were buried from here."

Wild Bill was a man of few words himself and asked no questions from idle curiosity.

He wished to know the result of the officer's mission, but said nothing to indicate the desire.

But Lieutenant Valdos went on to say:

"You know why I came here alone?"

"Yes, sir."

"I opened the graves."

Wild Bill said nothing.

"There were but eight bodies."

"That means, sir, that where nine men were reported killed, only eight were buried."

"Exactly."

"As the list was not made out until afterward, no count was doubtless made of the bodies."

"That is it, and the missing one was my brother."

"You think he was captured then, not killed?"

"He was not killed, for the mark I would have known him by was not on any one of the bodies—do you see this finger?"

He held up the little finger of his left hand.

"Yes, sir."

"Do you note any peculiarity about it?"

"I never did before, sir, but I do now."

"What is it?"

"There is but one joint in it from the socket to the point."

"That is just it."

"It is a strange mark, sir."

"Yes, and my twin brother, Elmer, has the same identical mark."

"That is strange; but with it a body could readily be identified."

"Beyond all doubt."

"But no body in the graves had the mark?"

"Not one, and more, there were but eight bodies, so that means that Elmer Valdos was either captured by the Indians, or his body was carried off by them if he was killed."

"My opinion is, sir, that he was captured alive, for they would not carry off the dead body of a pale face foe."

"You are right."

"If he was known to the Indians, sir, through some secret power or sign, of which you spoke to the colonel, then we may hear of him again; in fact he may become a leader with them, as with the Comanches, and become a very dangerous foe to us, for you know his ability to do harm, pardon me, sir."

"Yes, I know it but too well; but I am confident of one thing."

"Yes, sir."

"That Elmer Valdos, as outlaw, fugitive or renegade will never be heard of again out here on the frontier; no, he will take no more chances, I am sure, for even he can heed a warning when it is forced upon him as in his last narrow escape."

"Now, Wild Bill, let us drop the subject, as soon as you have told me if any thing occurred of importance after my leaving the fort."

"Nothing, sir, only all seemed glad that you had gotten your rights in the end, and only words of highest praise were heard of you, while of course your brother was condemned by all for the treacherous part he had played."

"The colonel did not care to have Miss Monastery come upon this expedition, yet could not well refuse Miss Turpin, and I was

told to keep the closest watch that no danger befell them, while you were envied by all the officers of the fort for being sent in command of the escort, especially by Lieutenant Cole, whom, pardon me, sir, but I do not believe will be your friend."

"I care neither for his enmity or his friendship, Wild Bill; but now about our trail?"

"Yes, sir."

"We are to go by the shortest and best trails to the Moonlight Mining-camps?"

"Yes, sir."

"You use your own discretion as to daily travel and night camps, and as to the best trails to take, for you know your duty far better than I can direct you, only we must not push on too rapidly and break the ladies down."

"No, sir, I will gauge their strength in another day's ride, but they did not mind the travel to-day, and it will be about our longest from sun to sun."

"All right, you know best."

"Now let us get off the dust of travel and go and join the ladies at dinner, for I see that Black Bob has gotten well under way."

"A few minutes later the officer and the scout joined Marcelite at their camp, where their tent was pitched, cots up and spread, folding table and chairs set and all in readiness, while Black Bob, the cook, was preparing a dinner most tempting, and Ellen setting the table."

When dinner was over the maidens got out their guitars, and the first night in camp passed away most enjoyably for the "Belles of the Border," as Wild Bill had already named them.

CHAPTER XXI.

FOES ON THE TRAIL.

It was the morning after the second night's camp on the trail, that Wild Bill was observed to be in a great hurry to get away.

He had noticed signs the night before which he did not like, and though, speaking only of his fears to the lieutenant, he appeared as serene as ever, he was really anxious, and neither he nor Kit Carrol closed their eyes all night, while the sentinels were quietly doubled, so as not to give the ladies any alarm.

The night passed without any disturbance, but Wild Bill had the camp awake at the first peep of day, and his scouts got all ready to start by the time the sun was rising.

"Is there any danger, Lieutenant Valdos?" asked Marcelite, who had quickly noticed that something had caused alarm.

"Wild Bill has discovered Indian signs, and is anxious to be on the march," was the reply.

As they got some distance away from the camp, Wild Bill, as he went over a rise, turned and looked back.

As he did so, he distinctly caught sight of a form moving in the timber.

Quickly turning in his saddle, with his glass to his eyes, he saw several horsemen riding into the deserted camp.

"Yes, they are on our trail, and I only hope they have not divided and gone ahead to ambush us."

"If they do, it means the ambush will be at Sentinel Pass," mused Wild Bill, and he rode on over the ridge.

Once out of the sight of the Indians in the deserted camp, he halted and beckoned to the sergeant to ride on and join him.

"Sergeant, there are red-skins already in the camp we left, but how many I do not know, only I saw the tracks of fully a hundred ponies last night."

"Drop back and ask Lieutenant Valdos to join me, and then tell Kit Carrol to hang further back in the rear and look to be closely followed."

"Yes, sir," and the sergeant rode back to obey his orders.

In five minutes Lieutenant Valdos was with the scout and asked:

"Well, Bill, more signs?"

"More than signs, sir, for I saw red-skins in our deserted camp, just as I came over the ridge."

"A stern chase is proverbially a long one, Wild Bill."

"True, sir, but the trail I saw last night numbered a hundred ponies, and that means about as many warriors."

"And we need not have any fear for we are twenty-one fighting men, with the two ladies, the two horse-wranglers and Black Bob to call on in a pinch."

"We are all right, sir, in the open country, or corralled; but I believe this is the same force we saw the trail of at our first night's camp, and if so it means they are following us."

"It may be so."

"All yesterday I steered clear of any place to ambush us, so they may have come on to watch their chance and catch us in a trap, for to-day there are several places where we can be ambuscaded, notably, the Sentinel Pass."

"Any way to avoid it, Wild Bill?"

"Yes, sir, I can avoid it by a ride of a dozen miles out of our way."

"You had better do so, for we want no fight if we can avoid it, for bullets and arrows are no respecters of persons."

"True, sir, and to have either of those young ladies killed would just about break my heart."

"Mine, too, so we will only stand at bay as a last resort."

"I have no fear for the pluck of the ladies, sir, for Miss Monastery, as you know, has been in half a dozen Indian-fights, while Miss Turpin has burned powder and seen men die, too, so they have nerves that will stand the strain, only, as you said, bullets and arrows strike at random."

"You will understand then, sir, if I branch off from the trail?"

"Certainly, and I will keep the command well closed up," and Wild Bill was left again alone at the head of the party.

For himself he was a man to love the ring of weapons, the shouts of a fierce combat, and gloried in danger unto death; but with two such fair charges along his brow became clouded as he dreaded the fate that might befall them.

He therefore kept well ahead of his command, and thus held on until the noon halt.

Not another sign of an Indian had been seen, but Wild Bill was too experienced a scout to believe they had drawn off, so the closest watch was kept, and Kit Carrol was given his dinner and told to camp back a mile on the trail.

The foresight of the scout was soon shown in this, as just as dinner was completed, Kit was seen afar off on a hill signaling wildly.

The camp was at once in commotion, the horses being bridled and saddled and all made ready for a retreat, just as Kit Carrol's rifle went to his shoulder and began to ring out shots rapidly.

A moment after he was seen to spring into his saddle and came dashing toward the camp.

Wild Bill was as cool as an icicle now, and Lieutenant Valdos as serene as a May morning, while neither Marcelite or Sue showed any sign of fear.

"We will push on at a good pace, sir, until the Indians come in sight and show their numbers," said Wild Bill, and as Kit neared them, suddenly over the ridge where he had been dashed a number of mounted warriors.

"Fifty," said Wild Bill quietly as he counted them, and added:

"We may look for fifty ahead, for those are only intended to drive us into an ambush."

CHAPTER XXII.

WILD BILL'S STRATEGY.

The arrival of Kit Carrol told how he had discovered the Indians coming along on the trail, and in seemingly no hurry until they signaled him, though that they knew there was a force not far ahead he felt most certain.

He had stood his ground, after signaling, until they came within range of his repeating-rifle, and then aiming deliberately, had opened fire with good result.

The Indians coming on with a rush, as though to drive the soldiers into a run, or bring them to a halt, Lieutenant Valdos and the rear squad of troopers halted and opened fire when they came within range, while the others, with Wild Bill ahead, continued on their way at a steady pace.

The fire of the corporal and his eight men, with the repeating rifles of Lieutenant Valdes and Scout Carrol, brought down several ponies and emptied a couple of saddles, a check which brought the Indians to a halt, for their rifles did not reach any more than their arrows.

"We are all right now, for they will keep at a more respectful distance," said the officer, and he followed on with his men.

All the feints of the Indians failing to bring the soldiers to a halt, or put them in rapid flight, they contented themselves with following at a distance just out of range, singing their war-songs, interspersed occasionally with a chorus of wild yells.

As the party neared the range ahead, in which was the Sentinel Pass, they came to a valley thickly timbered, and here Wild Bill rode back and joined the lieutenant.

"I wish to say, sir, that we can branch off here to the left, along the banks of the brook and not be seen by any look-out on Sentinel Pass, or by those who are following us."

"You know best, Wild Bill."

"You see, sir, we can guard the approach here easily, and they can be made to believe we have gone into camp for the night."

"Yes."

"By following the stream you will come, after a ride of half a dozen miles, to the foot-hills, and there you can halt for our coming, for I will remain here half an hour with the sergeant and one squad of men, Kit going on with you, sir."

"All right, Wild Bill."

"The Indians, when they believe we have camped for the night, will signal, with smoke, to their comrades at the Pass, and they will quietly await our coming to-morrow."

"And you really believe that there are more at the Pass?"

"Yes, sir, the rest of the one hundred whose trail we saw."

"We have seen no trail left by them."

"They flanked to get there, sir."

"Well, Wild Bill, I am too old an Indian fighter myself not to look for anything they might do, so I feel that you are right."

"I will continue on with the party, and await you at the foot-hills."

"Yes, sir, the rest here now will benefit our horses, and the halt at the foot-hills will help yours, and I do not believe we will be closely followed by those now in our rear."

So the party rode on, leaving Wild Bill, the sergeant and eight men in the rear.

The nature of the ground prevented the Indians from seeing the party divide, and as the scout at once had camp-fires built and placed sentinels, it gave the appearance that a halt had been made for the night, at a point which could be well defended.

As soon as the sentinels had been placed, upon positions where they could be seen by the Indians, and at the same time have the protection of the rocks, Wild Bill set to work to use a little strategy.

Two extra uniforms were taken and stuffed with leaves, a face was made of a handkerchief and a hat put on a manufactured head.

Two of the soldiers had cut out an imitation carbine, and when the dummy soldier was all ready, a squad marched to the two sentinel posts, as though relieving guard, and placed them on duty in the place of the live sentinels.

The two men just put there had been told not to move on their posts, and knowing that the Indians were watching them, though not visible, as they had camped beyond a rise, the "dummy sentinels" were left on post.

The camp fires were then replenished with wood, and Wild Bill made a short scout toward the red-skins to see that there were none of them very near.

He returned by the posts of the sentinels, stopped as though for a few minutes' talk with each, and then returning to the camp, mounted his horse and led the soldiers on the trail after their comrades, all enjoying greatly the strategy of the scout to keep the Indians from immediately following them.

"They will discover the cheat after night comes, when they creep up to pick off the sentinels, and then they will be mad clean through," explained Wild Bill.

After a ride of six miles they came to the foot-hills when the sun was just an hour above the western horizon, and their comrades enjoyed, also, when told of it, Wild Bill's strategic joke upon the red-skins.

Having disposed of supper, they started on their climb of the mountain, with Wild Bill in the lead, for he had before thus avoided the Sentinel Pass, so knew the trail well.

CHAPTER XXIII.

BROUGHT TO BAY.

WILD BILL rode to the front like a man who took life as it came, and yet he full well appreciated the great responsibility upon him of saving those for whom he was acting guide and scout.

He felt full confidence in his commander, for he knew that he could be depended upon and would yield to him when he knew the situation demanded it.

Kit Carrol he knew as a thorough scout and a man who would die by his side bravely if it came to that, while the sergeant and the soldiers had been picked as old Indian-fighters and men of nerve and pluck.

With the two maidens not easily frightened, and also able to lend a hand, as were also the two horse-wranglers and Black Bob the cook, if called upon, Wild Bill felt that in an open fight he had no reason to fear the hundred Indians who were, he was sure, determined to capture his outfit.

He led the way over the mountain by a trail which many a man would have shrunk from following, and yet he heard not a murmur, saw not the slightest hesitation in any one who was following his lead.

As he had hoped he got over the worst part of the trail before night came on, and the descent of the range on the other side was begun while the glimmer of daylight yet lingered.

The scout felt certain that he had left the Indians deceived, as to their having come on, and that those who were at Sentinel Pass, for he would cling to the belief that they were there, would only discover their escape from their trap when too late to do more than pursue.

He saw that the horses were feeling the hard ride, the climb and descent of the mountain after a good day's journey, but he was anxious to reach a clump of timber some miles beyond, where he had before camped and knew there was good water, grass, and that it was a strong position as well.

He did not doubt but that the Indians would follow, when they discovered that they had been outwitted, but with them as pursuers he had much less to fear from them and was sure that they would not go a great deal further away from their own country than they then were.

It was ten o'clock when the plain was reached on the other side of the mountain, and so, without resting the horses Wild Bill urged on the flight for the camping-place he had in mind.

An hour's hard riding brought them to the timber, which the scout boldly penetrated just before going in with the command.

The place was as silent as a grave, and fires were soon lighted, the tents pitched and supper was being prepared for all were tired out and hungry.

The horses had been quickly stripped and staked out near, and the sentinels were placed out upon the plain beyond where they were feeding, while Wild Bill and Kit Carrol scouted around to see that there was no danger lurking near.

Before retiring all was arranged just what to do in case of a surprise, and Wild Bill and Kit Carrol were to divide the night between them in walking the rounds of the camp some distance further out than the sentinels.

It was just at dawn when Wild Bill came into camp hastily and aroused the sleepers.

"I heard a sound far off on the plain that can be nothing else than the fall of many hoofs."

"The Indians discovered our escape sooner than we expected, and are coming on, for they know we must ford the stream at this point, so do not have to follow on trail."

"It will be well to call the horses in, sir, and station the men so we can give them a

surprise, for, believing that we consider ourselves safe they will expect to surprise us."

"I will at once get all ready," Wild Bill, answered Lieutenant Valdes, and he went the rounds of the camp, ordered the horses brought in and corralled and the men to stand ready to give battle.

Wild Bill had awakened Kit Carrol, and the two had gone back together on the plains, half a mile nearly from the camp.

The sound that had attracted the attention of Wild Bill was louder now, a dull, rumbling sound like far-away thunder.

"They are coming, chief, and there are lots of 'em," said Kit Carrol.

"Yes, the sound indicates a heavier force than a hundred horses, so I judge another band came up and pushed right on to run over our camp, found it was deserted and then went on to the Pass."

"That is just about it, chief."

"Do you think we had better light out?"

"No, for there is not another good place to stand them off within twenty miles."

"We can check them here, and if we have to retreat will make a running fight of it, for they cannot head us off."

As the sound grew louder, and Wild Bill knew that the Indians were not far away, he sent Kit Carrol back to the camp to tell the lieutenant he had better advance a few hundred yards with his men, take position in the first group of rocks near the ford and so be able to surprise the red-skins with a volley, after which a retreat could be made quickly to the stronghold, for such their camp really was from its natural advantages of defense.

Falling back quietly a few minutes after, Wild Bill found the lieutenant and his men at the group of rocks, and just then the shadowy outline of many horsemen became visible coming toward them.

It was a certainty that the Indians were sure that those they sought had continued their flight through the night, or were so sure that they would not be pursued they would not be particularly watchful, for they came on as though with no dread of discovery.

"They are going to halt at these very rocks and maneuver from here."

"When you fire, sir, let the men retreat quietly by fours, and they will still think you hold this position."

"When daylight reveals to the contrary our guns can reach them from the timber, while they cannot reach us."

"Now, sir," and Wild Bill pointed to the shadowy horsemen just visible in the gray of dawn, and within range.

"Ready, men! fire!" cried Lieutenant Valdes, and eighteen carbines and three repeating-rifles crashed together, bringing the red-skins quickly to a halt and revealing the fact that their foes had been brought to bay.

CHAPTER XXIV.

WILD BILL'S RUSE.

THE moment that the volley rung out, the soldiers were ordered to retreat rapidly and take up a position in the timber, the lieutenant, Wild Bill and Kit Carrol remaining with their repeating rifles, which they continued to empty at the red skins.

The latter hastily retreated out of range, but they had suffered loss in both braves and ponies, and there was little doubt but that they had been taken wholly by surprise, when they had expected to surprise their foes.

Having emptied his rifle Lieutenant Valdes also retreated to the timber, at the suggestion of Wild Bill, leaving the two scouts alone to hold their position among the rocks.

The Indians, not knowing that the soldiers had retreated, took up a position beyond range, evidently thinking that their foes intended to make their stand among the rocks, and not at the timber.

They could only await the rising of the sun, which would reveal the situation completely, and the pale-faces even more anxiously awaited the coming of light, that they might behold the strength of the enemy.

At last the sunlight fell over the plain, and all seemed quiet in the timber and at the rocks.

The Indians were a quarter of a mile beyond the rocks, and had taken their dead and wounded with them, but half a dozen ponies lying upon the grass was proof that equally as many warriors, if not more, had fallen, for the carbines and rifles had been aimed high, to strike human targets.

The first glance of the pale-faces showed that Wild Bill had been right in his surmise, which was that the Indians had discovered their retreat from the pretended camp by being reinforced, for they saw now over two hundred warriors in view.

They had evidently come up with the party awaiting near the camp, and confident in their numbers, had advanced, hoping to drive the soldiers upon their force in ambush in Sentinel Pass.

This had shown that the enemy had flown, and a fire had revealed the direction the trail had gone.

So they had followed over the mountains, after sending a courier to bring on the party from the Pass, and all had united and come directly toward the ford, knowing that the enemy could only cross there.

Feeling assured that the pale-faces had kept steadily on in their flight during the night, the Indians had been taken wholly by surprise when fired upon.

Such was Wild Bill's idea of what had been their movements, and it was the correct one; but, to his regret, he found that they had more than doubled in force, so were all of eight to one against the soldiers.

When the dawn revealed that the soldiers were in the woods, a very secure spot for defense, and where water and grass were at hand, the Indians gave a wild yell of triumph.

It did not change an expression of Wild Bill's face, but he said quietly:

"Kit!"

"Yes, chief."

"They do not know but that we met other soldiers here, so go back and say to Lieutenant Valdos that it would be a good idea to move the men about in the timber, in squads, and singly, so that they can appear three or four times the force we have."

"It's a good idea, sir," answered Kit, and he was starting off, when Wild Bill called out:

"Say, Kit."

"Yes, sir."

"Tell the lieutenant that he can cut sticks, and with the lariats and a couple of logs make a dummy cannon."

"A cannon, sir?"

"Yes, the soldiers can soon rig up a dummy that will look like a cannon, and haul it into a position where the Indians can see it, for you know they are more afraid of what they call the wheel guns, than anything else."

"That's so, sir."

"But they must get the ladies to cut up a red blanket, and stripe their uniforms with it, as well as alter their hats to caps, for you know red-skins are cunning, and know that red trimmings mean the artillery service."

Kit laughed and replied:

"You are a dandy, chief."

"You might tell him to rig up two dummy guns, and by making a show of artillery and force they will think we have at least a hundred men, and you bet they won't charge us with those guns in sight."

So Kit Carrol hastened back to the timber and finding Lieutenant Valdos breakfasting with the two young ladies he told him of Wild Bill's ruse, and all laughed at this conceit, but the officer at once set out to carry it into effect, while Marcelite and Sue went to work with a red blanket for the men to put the stripes on their uniforms and make caps of their hats to aid the deception.

In a few minutes a dozen of the troopers came dashing in on horseback, from where they had gone quietly and looked as though they were cavalry just coming in.

Ten minutes after twenty men marched the rounds of the timber, as though placing guards, and shortly after squads of half a dozen were seen going here and there.

The horses were led about too, and the timber of a couple of acres in size seemed to be alive with men.

The Indians were carefully watching the every movement of their foes, as was also Wild Bill from the rocks, and he smiled grimly as he muttered:

"They are playing the game well, for I could swear that there are a hundred men in that clump of timber—Ah! there comes the artillery into position."

As the scout spoke two horses were seen dragging up to the edge of the timber what certainly appeared to be a light gun, the gunners in attendance, and a short while after a second "gun" moved up from another point, and was placed for service.

The effect upon the Indians was electrical, and the stern face of Wild Bill broke into a broad smile as he saw the success of his ruse, for the red-skins quickly fell back beyond the ridge for safety from the "wheel guns" that had looked so threateningly at them from the shadows of the timber.

CHAPTER XXV.

A SECRET POWER.

WHILE Wild Bill was busy regarding the dummy guns through his glass, Kit Carrol returned and said:

"We did it, chief."

"Yes, and well, for I would swear that there was quite a force in the timber."

"I must tell Ellen to build a dozen different fires for breakfast, so as to keep up the deceit."

"There is not a red-skin in sight; but they want you to come to breakfast."

"I'll go now, and you remain here."

"I do not think we will be attacked now, but they will lay a siege to starve us out," and Wild Bill went back to the timber.

He was congratulated for his successful ruse, by both the lieutenant and the young ladies, and as he looked at the "guns" he could not but see that they had been most skillfully made, for a yellow blanket had been fastened around logs to look like brass guns, and the wheels had been made of sticks and saplings, bound securely with lassoos.

The men had the red stripes on their uniforms, and when Wild Bill suggested the building of a dozen fires, it was quickly done to add to the appearance of numbers.

"What do you think they will do now, Mr. Hickok?" asked Sue as she handed the scout a cup of coffee.

"Thank you, Miss Sue, I am indeed honored—why, Miss Marcelite, this is breakfast enough for a grizzly bear," he said as he took from Marcelite his well-filled plate; but answering Sue's question he said:

"As I look upon you young ladies as aides to the commanding officers, and know that you possess nerve enough for any man, I'll tell you frankly that I believe the Indians will set in to starve us out."

"But we have plenty of provisions."

"Yes, Miss Marcelite; but they can surround this place, getting to cover from a quarter to half a mile away."

"Now the grass within our range will last the horses about two days, though water is plentiful; but we do not wish to remain here besieged, so it is for Lieutenant Valdos to say what is to be done, for I can run the gantlet of their lines and go to the fort to the southward sixty miles after aid."

"That means perhaps three days before aid comes, Wild Bill, and seeing you depart would be an evidence of weakness, so that the Indians might make an attack, and if so, it would show that our guns were useless and our force was small."

"You are right, lieutenant, and I suggested the other course only in case you felt you could hold out here."

"You have another plan then?"

"Yes, sir."

"Let us have it then, for you know how thoroughly I rely upon you for aid, Wild Bill."

"Thank you, sir, for the compliment."

"But my plan would be to move out after dark, well spread out, to show a larger force than we have, and to rig the guns so that we can carry them along."

"We can head for the fort, and by dawn be forty miles away, and then camp for the day so as not to show our weakness, and I hardly believe the Indians will charge us, from fear of the supposed guns."

"If they do, we must fight them off as best we can."

Lieutenant Valdos made no reply, and all gazed anxiously upon his face.

As he remained silent so long Marcelite said:

"You do not approve of this second plan then, Lieutenant Valdos?"

"It is the best, I believe, with one exception."

"And that is?"

"I will see what I can do to drive those red-skins off."

The remark seemed as though the lieutenant had lost his head with vanity, and Wild Bill was the only one who did not smile at his words.

But Marcelite said:

"Now if you know any way in which you can stampede these red-skins, Lieutenant Valdos, I beg you to try it."

"Yes, and we will pray for your success in this world and salvation in the next," added Sue with a smile.

"I am not sure of success, but I will do my best, young ladies."

"If I fail, you have a good commander to depend upon in Wild Bill," and Lieutenant Valdos arose and walked over to where his pack saddle was.

They saw him take something out, what it was they did not know, and then he ordered his horse saddled and brought to him.

Mounting, the two girls and Wild Bill watching him closely, he waved his hand pleasantly and said:

"You are in command, Wild Bill, until my return."

"Yes, sir," and the scout saluted as the officer rode away.

Leaving the timber he rode directly toward the ridge, yet avoiding the rocks where the Scout Carrol was on guard.

Every eye was upon him, and as he neared the ridge they saw him make some movements with his hands and arms, and remove his hat.

Then above the ridge appeared scores of feather-bonneted heads as the Indians watched his approach, so daringly going right into their midst.

Nearer and nearer he went until he ascended the ridge, and not once looking back toward his own camp went out of sight just as the Indians gathered around him in scores.

"That man has some secret power, some hold upon them, as I have always felt he had," muttered Wild Bill.

CHAPTER XXVI.

MYSTIFIED COMPLETELY.

"WILD BILL, what does that mean?"

So asked Marcelite Monastery, as she stood with Sue Turpin and the scout, watching the strange scene that had taken place, of an army officer riding boldly into the midst of a band of hostile savages.

"Yes, Mr. Hickok, what can it mean?" added Sue.

Every soldier's eye had been upon the lieutenant as he rode away from the timber.

They were completely mystified as to his actions.

They had seen the Indians come upon the ridge and receive him, and he had not been shot or dragged from his horse.

In fact he seemed to have been received not as a foe.

Answering the questions of the two maidens, Wild Bill said:

"You may have heard, Miss Marcelite, that when Major, then Captain, Canfield was caught in a trap by the Comanches, and Lieutenant Valdos rescued him, all then said that he was friendly with the red-skins?"

"Yes, apparently their friend, yet their foe, and I heard it explained afterward that he, being a physician by profession, had rendered them great service when an epidemic was ravaging their villages."

"But these are not Comanches, you know."

"Very true, but you recall that he afterward saved your party by his knowledge of the country and the friendship the Comanches held for him."

"True, but, as I said, these Indians are Sioux."

"But there exists among all tribes a sign language, and they all know the signs when made them in token of peace."

"And you think that Lieutenant Valdos knows these signs?"

"I am sure of it."

"Else he could not have gone among them as he has, and if they withdraw then you need no further proof."

"No, yet why do you think he knows their secret signs, known to the Indians alone?"

"Well, he could not believe his brother was killed, as Major Canfield and all reported, and told your father that he felt sure that he had given some sign that protected him from death."

"But that was his brother, the outlaw."

"True, and when asked if he also knew the signs, I noticed that he gave an evasive answer to the question."

"Ah!"

"That convinced me that he did know the secret power, or signs, to exert over the Indians."

"Now, as he told you, his brother had not been killed, yet would be heard of no more, and now I am sure that he has taken the chances, taken his life in his hands, to see what power his knowledge of the secret signs will have over the Indians."

"He is a brave fellow, and Heaven grant that he be not harmed."

"The way he was received by the red-skins did not look to me as though he would be harmed, yet only the greatest nerve can save him."

"And that he possesses," Sue Turpin remarked.

"To a wonderful degree," said Marcelite.

"Yes, to a most remarkable degree," added Wild Bill, and he cast his eyes anxiously over toward the ridge where he had seen the officer disappear.

The minutes passed along, seeming like hours in the suspense that all felt, and yet the officer did not reappear.

At last Wild Bill walked out to where Kit Carrol was still on watch.

"What does it mean, chief?" eagerly asked the scout.

"I have always felt sure that Lieutenant Valdos knew as much about Indians as they did themselves, and now I am convinced of it, for he has gone among them to try his secret signs on them."

"If it was his brother, the outlaw, then he would rule the roost; but I don't know what hold Lieutenant Valdos has on them," said Kit.

"Nor I, but had he not felt that he did have power he would not have gone with a certainty of death; but he is plucky and took the chances."

"You bet he did."

"You saw his advance better from here than we did?"

"Yes."

"What did he do?"

"It struck me that he put something over him in front, face and all, and then waved his hands in a peculiar way."

"Yes, but the Indians did not appear hostile toward him?"

"Not in the least, as he went over the ridge."

"Well, Kit, keep your eyes open, and at the first sign of trouble break for the camp, for they may come with a rush, you know."

"I'll be wide awake, chief," answered Kit Carrol, and Wild Bill walked back toward the camp.

"Well, Wild Bill, what does Scout Carrol say?" asked Marcelite as he came back and joined them.

"He is as much mystified as we all are, Miss Marcelite."

"It is certainly time the lieutenant should have returned," anxiously said Sue Turpin.

"Yes, though red-skins are very deliberate in their councils, Miss Sue, and take a long time to decide what they will do, quick as they are in doing it after their minds are made up."

"Ah! there he comes now," cried Marcelite, and as she spoke a group of horsemen were seen to appear over the ridge.

"It is Lieutenant Valdos and he is surrounded by Indians," said Wild Bill, and his voice rung out in a command to stand ready to resist an attack.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE SACRIFICE.

THE lieutenant was certainly coming back, but then he was accompanied by a dozen

red-skins, two of whom wore the feathered bonnets of chiefs.

They rode toward the rocks, where Kit Carrol was stationed, and seeing this Wild Bill moved out of the timber toward them, making the remark:

"They are coming for a powwow, Miss Marcelite, and if necessary, to show a force of officers, the sergeant and corporal, yes and two or three of the men, must be rigged up with shoulder-straps and all you can lay hands on to look like captains and lieutenants, and grouped where they can be seen."

"I will see what it means, for they are not nearer than the rocks."

"Be careful, Wild Bill, for we cannot lose you too," said Marcelite.

"I don't wish to be lost either," was the smiling reply and Wild Bill continued on toward the rocks, where Kit Carrol still held his position.

The party of red-skins, with the lieutenant in their midst, halted within revolver range of the rocks and Adrian Valdos called out:

"Ho, Carrol, tell Wild Bill to come here—ah, there he is now."

Wild Bill advanced quickly to the rocks, halted there an instant for a word with Kit Carrol, and then boldly advanced beyond, his repeating rifle across his arm.

"Wild Bill, you speak Spanish, believe?" called out the lieutenant.

"Yes, sir, after a fashion."

"I will speak to you in that language then at times, for I have an idea that several of these braves speak English fairly well."

"Yes, sir."

"I went among them with signs of peace, which they understood, and asked them to allow us to go on our way unmolested."

"But they refuse?"

"They wish pay for it, and I have told them that they should have it, though they demand ten thousand dollars."

"Promise them a million, sir," said Wild Bill quickly.

"Yes, but it has to be paid, and yet I will pay it, as I am able to do upon my return to the fort."

"But now, sir?"

"That is the question, for they demand that I remain with them as a hostage until the amount is paid, for they have a renegade white chief among them and it is his doing."

"I see, sir; I thought as much."

"He demands that the sum be brought, within thirty days, to the Canfield battle-field where I joined you, and they give their pledge not to harm the bearer, but to put me to death if a force comes."

"They'd do it, too."

"Yes, the renegade chief wishes to kill me now, but they having honored my signs of peace will not allow it, so there is nothing to be done but to go on to the mines, and returning to the fort send out the money, which tell Colonel Monastery I will refund."

"Then I will be set free; but I wish you to send out now my pack-horse, and you can then go your way unmolested as soon as we depart, for I will get them away first so as not to reveal your small force."

"I don't half like this sacrifice on your part, Lieutenant Valdos."

"Don't mind that, Bill, old pard, for I do not."

"If those ladies were not along I'd fight it out, once I could get you back in the lines again."

"It would be madness, for there are two hundred and fifty of them, and they are enraged now at the losses we inflicted upon them."

"You must do as I say, so go back and get my pack-horse, rifle and belt of arms."

"I can but obey, sir, but I do not like the sacrifice you are making at all, sir."

"Don't mind me, for I am at home among the Indians; but go, now, so as to delay no longer and not let them change their minds."

The scout shook his head ominously, but at once turned and walked back to the rocks, where stood Kit Carrol, who, also understanding Spanish, learned during his scouting life along the Rio Grande, had heard all.

Back to the camp went Wild Bill, and as he was met by Marcelite and Sue, he said:

"We are all right, but the lieutenant

must run the risk, for it is a case of a renegade white chief of the Indians who demands ten thousand dollars, and he must remain until it is paid."

"Then return to Fort Blank at once, for my father will gladly pay it," said Marcelite.

"No, go on to the mines and my father will pay it," generously remarked Sue.

"No, the lieutenant has the money, or can get it he says, though of course he will not be allowed to pay it all, and I am to go back to the fort, after taking you ladies to the mines and meet a messenger at the Canfield battle-ground and pay over the cash, for I have thirty days in which to do it."

"This is a shame, and to think of the sacrifice Lieutenant Valdos makes."

"It is better than to sacrifice us all, Miss Marcelite, and I rather like the terms, except for his captivity, though I do not believe they will harm him."

"We can only agree to the demand then?"

"Yes, Miss Marcelite, and I will lose no time."

"Convey our deepest gratitude to Lieutenant Valdos, and tell him how we all appreciate his noble sacrifice," said Marcelite, and soon after Wild Bill left the camp leading after him the pack-horse of the lieutenant, and carrying his rifle and belt of arms along as well.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

AGAIN ON THE TRAIL.

WILD BILL's face was very pale and stern, as he walked back toward the outpost, leading the pack-horse of Lieutenant Valdos.

He was agreeing to terms he was forced to, having no alternative; but could he have gotten possession of Lieutenant Valdos again, and had not the charge of the two maidens, nothing could have forced him to yield, for he would have fought to the death rather.

He went past Kit Carrol with the remark:

"Keep your eyes open for treachery, for it may be a game of trick after all with those red-skins."

"Yes, chief, and if they make a break the first to go under will be those two chiefs on the spotted ponies," was Kit's response.

The group of Indians had sat silently upon their ponies, while Wild Bill had gone after the pack-horse, and Kit had not heard them utter a word, nor had the officer spoken.

He was in full view of Kit Carrol, sat with one foot thrown over the horn of his saddle, and his face was unmoved by the danger he was in, the sacrifice he was making for others.

When the chief of scouts was seen approaching again, the Indians uttered a few low tones, for they beheld the pack-horse.

It was evident that they feared the two dummy guns and felt that the soldiers were nearly one-third their own force at least.

"I am back again, Lieutenant Valdos, having obeyed your orders, sir," said Wild Bill, halting some hundred feet from the group.

"All right, Wild Bill."

"In thirty days send the money to the place appointed, and I'll be a free man once more," said the officer cheerily.

"Will you come forward and get the horse, sir?"

"No, I'll ask one of these chiefs to do so."

He turned and addressed one of the chiefs, speaking now in English, and the one he spoke to rode toward Wild Bill, yet very cautiously.

The scout handed him the rifle and belt of arms, placed the lead-line in his hands, and remarked:

"I'd just like to raise your scalp, red-skin."

That he believed so the chief showed by not delaying an instant, and Wild Bill called out:

"I'll be on hand with the dust, lieutenant, and the young ladies wish me to say they more than appreciate your sacrifice, as all of us do, sir."

"Present them my regards and thanks, Bill."

"Now, good-by, old pard, and if I should go under, I know you will have a scalp-raising tournament to avenge me."

"Adios amigo," and with a wave of his hat, the lieutenant turned and rode away, surrounded by the Indians.

Wild Bill watched them until they went out of sight over the ridge, and then, with Kit Carrol, started back to the camp.

"I brave man that, Kit?"

"You bet, and I guess I'll get to liking him, chief, as soon as I cease to regard him in the light I always held his brother."

"I struck him for a snug sum of hush money, for I am a poor man, and after I got it, I intended to get him arrested, for I knew he was Elmo, the outlaw, and if he was here now, you could not tell him from his brother."

"It is a most marvelous resemblance, surely: but I believe we are safe now, so we will push on for Moonlight Mine to prevent the temptation of treachery."

"Yes, but the lieutenant said after they had gone."

"Yes, that is so, and we can see them if they pull out."

"They are doing that now," said Kit, turning as they reached the timber.

"You are right," was Wild Bill's reply, as he gazed about the horizon and saw that the Indians were really raising the siege, or at least appearing to do so.

They had crossed the ford early in the morning, and had been seen taking up positions in every direction around the clump of timber, on the distant ridges.

Now they were moving in single file toward a common point, the fort, and watching their movements Wild Bill counted them, to see that there was no treachery intended, for he had a slight dread that they might be leaving a small force behind them from each party that had taken up position.

It was noon when they at last disappeared, having joined forces, and the column of nearly three hundred warriors was seen slowly moving back toward the mountain range in the direction of Sentinel Pass.

In their midst the glasses had revealed at the head among the chiefs the form of Lieutenant Valdos, leading his pack-horse, and he was watched until the column looked like a large black snake winding its way over the plain, for men and horses could no longer be distinguished, looking like a solid mass.

Dinner having been disposed of, the party, now under the command of Wild Bill, mounted their horses and started once more upon the trail, though with saddened faces at the fate that might yet befall the brave officer who had offered himself as a sacrifice for their sake.

Having had a good rest, with plenty of grass and water, Wild Bill pushed the horses briskly, anxious to get beyond all chance of a change of mind on the part of the Indians as soon as possible, and when he went into camp at nightfall, fully forty miles had been covered.

CHAPTER XXIX.

MOONLIGHT MINING-CAMP.

MOONLIGHT MINING-CAMP was located in a wild spot in the mountains, just across the line of New Mexico.

It was in the midst of beautiful scenery, and the cliffs that overhung the camp had the appearance of being bathed in moonlight, hence the name given to it.

The camps extended for many miles from the "Moonlight Cliffs," and there were hundreds of miners within half a day's journey of what was known as "Mascot City," a bevy of camps in which saloons were more numerous than gold mines, and where there were several stores, a blacksmith shop, a stage office, for there was a coach running once a week to Santa Fe and back, and several scores of cabins.

It was in Moonlight Mines that Miner Hugh Turpin had struck it rich, having gone there years before accompanied by his little daughter Sue, and in whose honor Mascot City had been named.

There was no more popular man in the mining country than was Hugh Turpin when he went to the mines, and Sue but added to his popularity, and she too became the idol of the mines, so that when, as has been told, she was kidnapped by Black Jack, a desperado, who proved to be her own uncle, it had been a cruel blow upon all.

When restored to her father by Wild Bill, she had been welcomed in the warmest man-

ner, and it was with deepest regret the miners had seen her depart for the East to be educated, feeling certain that she would forget all about them and Moonlight Mine.

Returning several years after to settle up his business in the mines, Hugh Turpin had shown himself the same good fellow he had always been, and though he had become a very rich man he was not in the least spoiled by his successful ventures, but treated all his old chums with the same generous spirit that he had always done when a poor miner.

As he would be compelled to remain much longer than he had anticipated and the miners were wild to see "Little Sue, the Mascot of Moonlight Mine," Hugh Turpin had decided to have her come to him, especially as he knew how anxious she had been to revisit the scenes of her girlhood and which she had loved so well.

In those days she was wont to go dashing along the valleys at full speed upon her swift pony, would hunt in the mountains and always bring home game, and every miner had regarded her as his especial pet.

The camps had changed since those days, for many strange faces were there, a number of new cabins had been built, other "finds" been made, and Mascot City had added several hundreds more to its population.

Many miners had made fortunes and gone away, and new ones taking their places Hugh Turpin had soon found that there were half the people there who knew him in name only.

When he decided to have Sue come there, the miners were delighted, and holding a council it was decided that they must do all in their power for her comfort.

Moonlight Valley was a canyon of picturesque beauty, and the end of it nearest the mountains was the sole property of Hugh Turpin.

Here in a beautiful grove, bordering a swift-flowing stream was the miner's cabin, a sunny little home of three rooms, and from which a grand view could be obtained.

But this would not do for the Mascot of Moonlight Mine, it was very quickly decided, and knocking off work in their mines the men set to work to build a cabin that would be a home worthy of Sue.

Many hands make light work, and trees were soon cut down, the logs hewn and drawn to the hill-top, and a cabin of four rooms put up in front of the other one, while by voluntary gifts from the old friends of the Mascot, and the purchases of Hugh Turpin at the country stores, the new home was made most attractive and comfortable.

In the letters he had received from his daughter, Hugh Turpin had been told of her devotion to Marcelite, and several times she had written him to the effect that she would dearly like to visit him and bring Marcelite Monastery with her, as the latter would gladly come if the opportunity offered.

It therefore struck Hugh Turpin that it was possible that Marcelite might accompany his daughter, and to be on the safe side he had in making his preparations arranged for her also.

Just when to expect Sue he did not know, but he felt that Wild Bill would not delay long in bringing her to him, if nothing unforeseen prevented.

That there was great danger in the trip, the miner did not believe, when Wild Bill was the guide and scout, and he had asked Colonel Monastery to kindly allow his daughter an escort, while, should she wish to invite anybody to accompany her, she would be more than welcome if she felt she could put up with mining-camp life.

"Waal, Pard Turpin, yer is all ready fer yer darter now, and we c'dnt hev did more of she were a queen, and she's deservin' of it; but we is all afeerd she has been a leetle spoilt in her notions, sence she were our Mascot," said Ben Bronson, an old miner who had pegged industriously away for years in the mines, but had yet his fortune to find.

"Wait and see her, Ben, and judge if she is not the same Sue you knew—ah! there comes a party on horseback far down the valley, and I am sure that Sue is coming, for they are soldiers," and at Hugh Turpin's words Ben Bronson gave a war-whoop of joy.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE WELCOME.

As all the miners in Moonlight Valley were aware of the coming of Sue Turpin, all were awaiting her arrival with a keen anticipation of pleasure.

It was about the middle of the afternoon when Wild Bill, some hundred yards in the lead of his party, for he put on no airs because he was in command, entered the gap that led in from the plains among the mountains in which were the various mining camps of Moonlight Valley.

The old familiar scenes came back to Sue Turpin with a flood of remembrance at the life she had led there when a girl just entering her teens, and she pointed out to Marcelite various points of interest that they came upon.

Halting for the others to come up, Wild Bill said:

"Well, Miss Sue, you are once more in your old trailing ground, so I am under your orders now."

"We will go right on up to the old home, Mr. Hickok, for there is a fine camping place near for the soldiers," answered Sue, her face radiant with pleasure, and, as they moved on once more she continued:

"There is Eagle Cliff Mine, Marcelite, and Hangman's Canyon, for so many poor fellows have met death there, while you see Vigilante Rock is that black cliff ahead."

"That clump of trees you see up on the mountain-side is called Sue's Folly, for I once risked my life to climb up there, and from the remembrances of that day I think it was properly named."

"Now we are going to turn into the valley, for yonder rise the Moonlight Cliffs," and Sue pointed out the line of cliffs that gave the valley and mines their name, and the sight of which caused Marcelite to exclaim:

"Oh how beautiful! and how strange the effect."

Just then several miners were seen, and upon discovering the party they dropped their tools and ran out to the trail, cheering as they waved their hats.

"The Mascot has come!"

"Welcome to the Mascot of Moonlight Mountains!" came the cry, and it rung through the valley, notifying the others of the arrival of Sue Turpin.

Crowds began to run toward the trail, and as the party rode along they were greeted with the wildest cheers of welcome.

Wild Bill was known to some of the miners and he also came in for a welcoming cheer, as did Uncle Sam's Boys in Blue.

Sue returned the salutes by waving her hat, and yet now and then was forcibly halted and had to shake hands all around with a group more enthusiastic than the others.

"How is yer, Little Sue!"

"Hooray for ther Mascot!"

"Welcome home, leetle gal!"

"You bet we is glad ter see yer."

"Then yer hain't forgot us, Miss Sue."

"We is right down tickled ter see yer."

"And yer pretty pard thar is welcome."

And so on went the expressions of welcome, as Sue rode on up the valley with Wild Bill in the lead, Marcelite Monastery by her side, and the soldiers and others following in close order, all amused and pleased, with the welcome the miner's daughter was receiving.

A few of the expressions made Sue and Marcelite laugh heartily, for one miner cried out:

"Ther sight o' you is good fer sore eyes," while another frankly confessed:

"I gits drunk in yer honor, Miss Sue, this very night."

The noisy welcome brought all the miners out along the trail up the valley, and cheering and hat waving, with a fusillade of revolver shots as a salute, continued until the party reached the cabin of Miner Turpin.

As she leaped from her saddle her father greeted Sue, and then gave a most cordial welcome to Marcelite, to whom he said:

"I hoped, yet scarcely dared believe you would come."

"Oh, yes, I came about as good as I could," said Sue—I never in my life saw a girl with so many lovers, Mr. Turpin, as Sue has," responded Marcelite.

Wild Bill was also warmly welcomed by the miner, as were also the soldiers, who were directed to a grove on the stream near by, where there was fine grass for their horses and wood for camp-fires.

The scout declined Mr. Turpin's invitation to become his guest in the cabin, saying that he would camp with the men but take his meals at the cabin and he led the way to the camping-ground, while Sue said:

"Father we owe everything to Wild Bill, noble fellow that he is, for he has saved us from death, or capture by the Indians, and the only thing that mars the pleasure of my coming is that we left Lieutenant Valdos as a hostage among the red skins."

"May I ask, my daughter, if it was the brave officer who passed through here with Wild Bill, on his way to the fort, for I know his story, or his brother who impersonated him?"

"It was the true Adrian Valdos, father, and a brave man he is, and he must not pay the amount of ransom which a renegade white man demanded, for you must pay it and deduct it from my wedding present."

The miner laughed and asked:

"What, are you to be married then, Sue?"

"Oh, no! no! I meant when I got the chance to marry," cried Sue blushing.

"You are worth to me all the ransom any renegade will demand, so it will be my pleasure to pay it," was the generous response and he led the maiden into the cabin to show them all that the miners had done for their comfort, and said:

"They are as glad to see you, Sue, as though you were their own child, while all feel highly honored at Miss Monastery's coming with you."

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE DESPERADOES' "NEST."

WILD BILL knew that Lieutenant Valdos had secret orders from Colonel Monastery to remain several days in the mines, apparently to rest his cattle, but in reality to hunt for several deserters from the army who were suspected of being there, lured to desert by the hope of digging out fortunes, and also particularly to hunt down half a dozen or more desperadoes who had made themselves liable to the military law of the department.

Of course in these still hunts Wild Bill was to be the real mover, but the orders had been given to the lieutenant in the presence of Marcelite, and upon the trail she had asked the scout if the officer had made him acquainted with what he was expected to do in the matter.

A negative reply caused Marcelite to say: "I suppose that he intended to tell you later, Wild Bill, but as he is a prisoner now, and I heard all that was said, my father making no secret of it before me, I will tell you what it was, and I can even give you the names of the deserters and the desperadoes referred to."

"I tell you this as I deem it my duty, for I know my father expected more of this expedition than that it should be an escort party merely, and, but for the fact that Lieutenant Valdos had instructions for you, he would have given them to you personally, so if you can carry out his wishes it will be a service that will be appreciated, and win fame for you as well."

"I thank you most kindly, Miss Marcelite, and will receive my orders from you the same as from Lieutenant Valdos, who doubtless forgot to tell me, or could not do so, when captured," answered the scout.

This conversation occurred upon the trail, and when the party had arrived safely at the miner's home, Marcelite sought the next morning after breakfast, an interview with the scout, at which Mr. Turpin and Sue were also present.

"Mr. Hickok and I had some talk over a matter on the trail, which I happen to know Lieutenant Valdos had orders to ferret out, Mr. Turpin, and I wish you to hear what it was," said Marcelite.

She then went on to explain just what the instructions were that were given Lieutenant Valdos by her father, and added:

"Knowing the miners as you do, sir, you may be able to put Wild Bill upon the right track, for I have written down the names given of the deserters, and which I happen to know of."

"Here also are the names, as given by my father of several noted lawless men and desperadoes."

And she handed over a list, which Wild Bill read aloud.

There were the names of five deserters, with the regiments they belonged to, and a description of the men and time of desertion.

The next list of names Wild Bill read as follows:

"Mephisto Mike, charged with several murders, and being an all round bad man."

"Real name not known, but given the name he bears in the mines on account of his striking resemblance to Mephisto."

"Red Hand Romeo, a dandy of the frontier, always quoting Shakespeare, and with his left hand reddened by a birthmark extending to the wrist."

"Is left handed, a dead shot, is wanted for numerous murders, while there is a price offered for him dead or alive by the Governor of California."

Then followed the names of several who belonged to a band of desperadoes known as the "Outlaw Owls," and his list ended with:

"Dick Dash, the Desperado Duelist, a gambler who always seeks personal difficulties, and is a dead shot, defying justice and right—the most dangerous man in the mining country, and one who is the mortal foe of soldiers."

"They are a sad lot, and the mines will be the better for their removal, for they are suspected of crimes that cannot be proven on them here."

"I can point the desperadoes out to you, Wild Bill, but am not sure of the soldier deserters," said Mr. Turpin.

"No, it will only get you into trouble, sir, and I can pick them up by degrees in a quiet way."

"I have heard of the Owls, and also of Mephisto Mike, Red Hand Romeo, and Dick Dash I know, for we have a little debt to settle between us, as he killed Scout Sykes, a dear pard of mine."

"I am sorry to be the one to put you upon a red trail, and one that must prove fatal to some; but then I know how anxious my father was to put down this lawless element, and he felt that with the picked soldiers sent along, and Lieutenant Valdos and yourself, he had the very ones to strike a blow that would be felt, and which the commanding general has been urging to have done."

"I shall be glad to go upon the trail, Miss Marcelite, a red one though it may be, and do my duty as I understand it, and I know that in the sergeant and his men I have the best of allies," answered Wild Bill, and he added:

"I'll take in the city to-night for pointers."

Finding themselves most comfortably located, and enjoying the serenades of the miners given them during the night, and their warm welcome, with unsurpassed scenery about them, and a fascination in the wild life of a mining camp, both Marcelite and Sue were glad that they had come, and were determined to enjoy their stay, though they could not but dread that there was great danger to Wild Bill in the red trail he was to start upon that night.

CHAPTER XXXII.

DECOYING DESERTERS.

WILD BILL was a man of the calmest demeanor, even when aroused.

He was in no sense of the word a bravado, and though many stories have gone the rounds of his personal difficulties, some told by those who should have known better, he was not a man to seek trouble, but rather to avoid it.

When brought face to face with an encounter that must prove fatal, he never shrunk from death, but met a foe as a brave man should, after taking great chances not to be thought to have taken an advantage.

A man of herculean strength, quick in his movements, cool and determined, he was a

most dangerous adversary to meet, and when in the discharge of his duty shrunk from no danger, however great.

A better man to have gone upon the desperado hunting mission could not have been found, and Colonel Monastery was glad to have a cool, daring and able officer such as he knew Adrian Valdos to be, to be in command and companion of Wild Bill in the hazardous work of running down deserters and outlaws, while the sergeant, corporal and the men had been picked for their courage, coolness and ability, the ablest aides to their leaders.

Having "done themselves proud," as they expressed it, in their welcome to Sue Turpin and her guest, the miners wished to taper off their enthusiasm with a little spree, and the second night the saloons were more than usually crowded, while the gambling tables were well filled.

The presence of Wild Bill and the soldiers camped in the valley, had a depressing effect upon quite a number of miners, there being men who loved lawlessness, and who had doubtless left their homes for the good of the country.

Men branded with crime had no love of keepers of the law, and those were the ones depressed by the presence of the noted bordermen and the soldiers.

Why they did not at once start back upon their trail to the fort they could not understand.

They had done their duty as an escort, so let them return, they argued.

Then came the rumor that they were to remain until the miner Turpin left, and escort him, his daughter and their fair guest back to the fort, for it was whispered that the miner would carry back with him a very large sum in gold-dust.

Unmindful of what was said, Wild Bill rode through the camps, apparently greatly interested.

He enjoyed chats with several miners, and when night came on wended his way on foot with Sergeant Dean, to Mascot City.

They dropped in casually at the different gambling-saloons, and at each one Wild Bill played a few games of chance and without good fortune attending him.

He was asked to play by several men who made gambling their trade, but said he would be glad to do so some other night, but he was only trying his luck then with small sums.

It was late however when he walked back to the camp with the sergeant.

As they got clear of the cabins Wild Bill said:

"Well, sergeant, what luck?"

"I picked out three, sir."

"And I two."

"Let us see if we hit upon the same men."

"Mine were all infantry men, sir."

"Good! One of mine was a cavalryman, the other belonged to the artillery, so that makes the very five the colonel wanted."

"Yes, sir."

"You don't think they suspected you?"

"They knew me, sir, but they felt safe in their change of appearance, for a full beard, long hair and miner's dress, with a couple or more years added to their lives, makes a great change from a smooth shaven, short-haired soldier in uniform."

"You are sure of your men then?"

"I am, sir, for I remembered them perfectly and had what proof I needed."

"And I am sure of mine, for they deserted from McPherson, and were bad men."

"Now to get hold of them."

"It will raise a row, sir."

"Oh of course, there will be pards to take up for them, but that don't scare me."

"I wish to be safe though, so as to get the whole five at one haul, so we must decoy them."

"How can we?"

"I'll tell Miner Turpin who they are, and find out from him what fellow I can get as a decoy duck, to get the five of them together at a certain place, where we can capture the outfit."

"A good idea, sir," and the sergeant seemed pleased at the prospect.

When he went to breakfast at the cabin in the morning Wild Bill told Miner Turpin just who the deserters were, for he had gotten the names that each was known by, Mr. Turpin at once said that though they were

gold-diggers they yet had had names in the mines, and he knew one man, who for pay, would entrap them in some way.

This man Wild Bill at once went in search of and found him taking his "eye-opener" at the bar.

"Drink with me, pard," he said, and cigars followed at the scout's expense also, after which the two had a little game of cards together in which Hank Hull, as he was called, won a little money.

The game with a couple of more drinks, made the two apparently good friends, and Wild Bill said:

"You have a lead I believe?"

"Yas, pard, it's up beyond your camp, but it pans out so trilling, I has ter do other work fer a honest livin'."

"See here, do you really wish to do some honest work?"

"Try me."

"I will give you some dust, and you can put it in your mine, as though found there."

"Then go and ask five men I will give you the names of, to come there and see it."

"Yer is after kassoin' somebody."

"Yes."

"Maybe I'll git bored."

"No, I'll lasso you too, as you call it, to prevent your being suspected, and have others afterward to prove you are not the man I want, so will let you go."

"Good! what's ther job worth to yer, pard?"

"Just one hundred dollars."

"I'll do it."

"Who is yer game?"

"I'll tell you, and here is the gold find, which is yours also, and you can have your men there at four o'clock this afternoon."

"I'll go yer," was the emphatic response.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A CLEVER CAPTURE.

It was just four o'clock when five rough-looking men passed up by Miner Turpin's house and halted under the cliff half a mile beyond, at a spot where some work had been done on a gold find.

This was up a narrow canyon in the cliff, and there stood Hank Hull to welcome them.

"I tell yer, pards, I have struck it rich I is sartin', but I lets you and a few others knows, so I kin sell out quick and make no noise about it, as I doesn't like those soldiers in ther valley, for all ther time I has cold chills chasen each other up and down my back, fearin' I is wanted, yer see, so I'll sell cheap and git out o' here on ther jump."

"Here are ther yellow dirt jist as I find it, when I stuck my pick in thar, so make me a bid, and when t'others come I has axed, I'll let her go to them as wants it most and has ther cash down ter pay."

Such was Hank Hull's little introductory to the sale of his mine under the pretense of having that morning unearthed quite a rich find of gold.

The men looked at the dirt and one grumbled:

"If it holds at this, it's rich dirt, Hank; but I hain't got much cash ter give."

"Me nuther, though I kin rake up a leetle."

"Me too, for I keeps a few hundreds handy about me."

"I'll chip in with some also."

"Count me one-fifth buyer," said the last of the five.

"That's the talk, and it's why I asked the five of you, as I knowed yer allers had cash."

"Now I could sell to Miner Turpin mighty quick, only I thought I'd give poor men a chance."

"I tried it on ther sergeant of ther soldier outfit, but he said he wasn't buyin', but would tell Wild Bill, and maybe he had some cash ter spend—there they comes now."

"But we takes yer mine, so call it sold, for we hain't lingerin' here ter powwow jist now."

"Durn 'em, what did yer tell them hawks fer," and the five men looked uneasy and were turning to go, just as Wild Bill and Sergeant Dean came into the narrow canyon.

"Hold on, gentlemen, don't be in a hurry, for it's my treat—"

"Hands up all of you!"

The scout's two revolvers, one in each

hand, were leveled at the men, and each one of the five seemed to feel that the muzzles pointed directly into his face.

They were all armed, quick to draw and were bad men when they held the advantage; but they stood now so that not one could take refuge behind the other, a movement of a hand would be the signal for a death-shot, and the scout's deadly aim was well-known, as well as the fact that he was not one to count odds.

It seemed also that Hank Hull was wanted as well, for he had quickly raised his hands at the stern command of Wild Bill.

"What ther devil does yer mean?" growled one of the men, yet he had his hands raised over his head.

"I'll explain later."

"Sergeant, present those six gentlemen with a pair of your extra fine steel bracelets with snap locks."

The sergeant also had his revolvers drawn, but replacing one in its holster, he took from his pocket six pairs of steel manacles, and stepped up in front of the nearest of the miners.

"Pards, must we put up with this?" asked one.

"It is lead or steel—take your choice," said Wild Bill, and the men shuddered at his words, and the click of the spring as it snapped upon the hands of the man the sergeant had put the manacles upon first.

"Don't be fools, pards, for our friends will soon set us free," said one of the men, and he held out his hands for the manacles.

"That's so," said another cheerily, and the others were quickly ironed and disarmed, Hank Hull among the rest, and who seemed to take it most to heart, judging by his actions.

"What has we done, pard?" he whined, lugubriously.

"I arrest you as deserters from the United States Army," was Wild Bill's response.

Instantly the face of the "deacon" brightened, while he said:

"Then I hain't in it, pard, for I never were a sojer in my life."

"No more was I," growled one of the others.

"No doubt you are all innocent; but I happen to believe I have the right men, and when you get to the fort and meet your old comrades there, then you will be able to prove whether you deserted or not."

"Now, sergeant, march these men off to the camp and keep them under guard."

The sergeant at once ranged them in line, slung their belts of arms over his arm and started them off.

As they came out into the valley, there was some low whispering among them, for they caught sight of several miners, and one of the men broke out in a wild cry:

"Ho, pards, ther blue-coats has got us."

"To ther rescue, comrades!"

The cry rung loudly down the valley and reached many ears, for a dozen men at once appeared in sight.

"Repeat that cry any one of you, and I'll send a bullet through your heart," sternly said the scout, as he came rapidly after the prisoners, and seeing that the call was being responded to he continued:

"Come, double-quick, march!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A DUEL TO THE DEATH.

THE miners who had heard the cry of one of the deserters, saw the cause in there being six men marching along in charge of the sergeant and Wild Bill.

Who those men were they did not know at a glance, but the call was for help, and shouting to others to follow they came at a run toward the scene.

It was a quarter of a mile to the military camp, and from its position it was not in sight, but Wild Bill had made a clever capture of his prisoners and was anxious to get them under the protection of the soldiers, so gave the order to double-quick.

The men at once came to a standstill, refusing to move, but the scout drew his bowie-knife, sprung behind the rear man, and pressing the point against his back ordered:

"Now, double-quick, march!"

"For God's sake, boys, obey, for the knife is cutting into my back," cried the man

threatened with the bowie, though the point had not touched his flesh.

Thus urged the men obeyed, and went off at a steady double-quick which only training could have accomplished, all except Hank Hull who could not keep the step.

He was at once dragged out of his place and put in the rear with the remark of the sergeant:

"He never was a soldier, sir."

"I believe you are right, sergeant; but here come the rescuers."

"Halt!"

The halt was made and up dashed a man almost of giant size, with a red, evil face, and shouted:

"Hold on thar, pard, you is a trille previous."

"I know my duty, sir."

"These are deserters from the army, and I have arrested them," was Wild Bill's calm reply.

"And I knows mine, and that means I says they is miners, and you can't come no grab game on my pards."

"Do you intend to interfere?"

"I does."

"Better think better of it, and not do so."

"I'm a-goin' ter set them men free—hain't we, pards?"

He turned toward the score of men now gathered there, and saw with pleasure others quickly coming upon the scene.

At his question a number of voices answered in the affirmative.

"Gentlemen, I am in the discharge of my duty as a Government officer, and I warn you to keep hands off."

"These men are deserters, and if they can prove that they are not, that will set them free."

"I says they goes free now, and what I says goes," the big man remarked, while one of the crowd said:

"Better let 'em go, Wild Bill, for that is Hercules Harry, and he is no man to fool with."

"Thanks for your advice, friend, but if Hercules Harry wants these men he'll have to fight for them," was Wild Bill's quiet rejoinder.

"Is that yer game?" roared the big fellow savagely.

"I seek no trouble, but if you attempt to rescue these men, why you and I will come together, that is all."

Wild Bill kept his eye upon the big fellow, for he could see that he was a dangerous man, and he was ready for any move upon his part.

It was well he was watching him, for the Hercules suddenly dropped his hand upon his revolver, yet before he could show it the scout had him covered.

"Don't do it, for you love life, I know," said Wild Bill in the calmest tones possible.

"I does love life too well ter throw it away, and yer is quicker than greased lightning, but I come here ter set them men free, and says I, if yer wants 'em, fight fer 'em."

"I will, if I am forced to do so."

"Will you have it out with me squar'?"

"Do you mean that I am to fight you a duel?"

"Just that."

"I have no quarrel with you, and I seek none."

"I am in the discharge of my duty, so I warn you off," said Wild Bill.

"Then yer backs down."

"I fear no bully such as you are, so stand aside, for I pass on with my prisoners."

Wild Bill stepped toward the man as he spoke, still holding him covered.

The Hercules did not move, did not dare drop his hand upon his revolver.

The scout reached him, and then, with a quick movement, which even the quickest eye was unable to see how it was done, he had dealt the bully a blow in the face with one hand, while with one foot he tripped him, hurling him to the ground with a force that half stunned him.

The spectators could not believe their eyes, at seeing their Hercules thus easily done for, and they gazed at Wild Bill in wonder, while he said:

"Now, sergeant, we will move on."

"No, yer don't!" roared the fallen man, staggering to his feet, revolver now in hand, and firing as he bounded forward.

With a shriek of pain Hank Hull fell dead in his tracks, for he stood just behind the scout, and mingling with his cry was the sharp report of a second shot.

This time it was Wild Bill who fired, and his aim was true as ever, for his bullet crashed in between the eyes of Hercules Harry, who fell his length at the scout's feet, a dead man.

"I hope this killing will have to go no further," said Wild Bill, as he glanced over the crowd, many of whom were now beginning to show a very ugly spirit toward him.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE MASCOT'S NERVE.

"It's got ter go further, Wild Bill, for no man sha'n't come inter this mining-camp, arrest our comrades and kill a pard of mine, and I not hold him responsible."

The speaker was a small, wiry man, dressed in top-boots, and a suit of black, his slouch hat being black, also.

A glance showed Wild Bill that the man must be Mephisto Mike, for he had the look of the man described to him as bearing that name.

He did not wish more bloodshed, but was not a man to be driven from his duty, though he saw now that a number of the crowd were ready to back the man.

"See here, pard, don't be a fool, for the fool-killer is around to-day and you don't wish to be singled out by him."

"Is you the fool-killer yer speaks of?"

"If I have to kill you, yes, for you are chipping in where it is not your game."

"I chips in when I sees fit to do so, and ef yer has kilt Hercules Harry, I hain't afeerd of you."

"Well, play your hand, for life's too short to fool away time."

"Will yer set them men free?"

"Not in a thousand years."

"I'll play yer a game for 'em."

"Then step out of the crowd and draw."

"I mean with cards."

"And I mean with revolvers, for sixes are trumps and I hold a full hand."

"Do you pass?"

Mephisto Mike saw that the laugh was upon him.

He had challenged for a game, and the scout had taken him up, but with revolvers instead of cards.

His look over the crowd showed that he must make a bold stand or lose his prestige.

The fate of Hercules Harry had cowed many into submitting to the will of the scout, and they were surprised when Mephisto Mike had chipped in, game as he was known to be.

Now it looked as though he would stand a bluff.

But Mephisto Mike was a man with unbounded confidence in himself, and he could not back down before men who had always feared him, so he said:

"I don't pass, but orders you to let them men go."

"And I refuse, while, to give you a hole to sneak out of, I warn you that you are interfering with a Government officer in the discharge of his duty."

"What does yer arrest them for?"

"As deserters from the army."

"Has yer ther proof?"

"I have."

"Show it to me."

"I recognize these two men, and Sergeant Dean knows those three."

"What does they say?"

"We denies it," came in a chorus from the five men.

"I takes their word."

"Well, what are you going to do about it, Micky?"

"Pards, are you with me?" and Mephisto Mike glanced over the crowd.

There were fully a hundred men in the crowd now, and though some of them felt that Mephisto Mike was weakening in calling for aid from the crowd, yet a number were determined to stand by him.

There were others present who wanted to back up the scout, the law-abiding men in the crowd.

They felt that in the loss of Hercules Harry the camps had suffered no misfortune, and that Hank Hull would be missed by no

one, and it had been a lucky thing that he had been in the way of the bully's bullet aimed at Wild Bill.

If Mephisto Mike was killed by the scout, no crepe in token of respectful regrets would be hung to the latch strings of any of the cabins, but rather a fervent delivery of thanks that another miner had passed in his chips.

But, seeing that in that particular crowd, the worse element predominated, the better class of men kept in the back-ground, for Wild Bill had developed a remarkable capability of taking care of himself.

But Mephisto Mike's question had to be answered, for he had glanced around the crowd his eye falling upon those who he knew would hardly dare decline, and some of whom would respond from sheer love of seeing more killing, others from fear of being held to account by the desperado if he escaped death.

"I says, pards, is yer with me in perfecting our friends?" repeated Mephisto Mike, in a louder and more threatening tone.

A chorus of voices answered in the affirmative and the crowd came closer.

But Wild Bill's face did not change in expression, unless it was that a grim smile hovered about his mouth, and his voice was firm and distinct, as he said:

"You make a mistake, gentlemen, for I have the right to arrest these men, and I shall shoot to kill, if I am driven to it."

"We kin shoot to kill too, Wild Bill, and Mephisto Mike says so."

That another moment would have brought on a deadly encounter, all knew, for Wild Bill's face now showed the spirit of a man determined to do and die right there, and the crowd wavered to give way for those who meant to engage in the deadly conflict.

But as they wavered, into their midst glided a slender form, and the clear voice of a woman cried:

"Cowards! do you dare fire on me too, for I take sides with Wild Bill!"

It was Sue Turpin, the Mascot of Moonlight Mountain that spoke, and hardly had she uttered the words when Marcelite Monastery glided up to the other side of Wild Bill, and she too, as did Sue Turpin, had her repeating rifle in her hand ready for use.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

WILD BILL WARNED.

SUE TURPIN and Marcelite had just come in from a hunt down the valley and in the mountains, and the negro cook was taking the game they had brought back with them, when he said:

"I thinks somethin' is goin' wrong up the valley with Mister Bill, Missy Sue."

"Why, what is it?" and Sue gazed up the valley where the crowd surrounding Wild Bill and his prisoners were in sight.

"My glass, quick!" cried Sue, and Marcelite's maid hastily brought it to her.

"Come, Marcelite, for Wild Bill is surely in some trouble there," she cried, and, turning to the negro, she continued:

"Run down to the troopers camp and tell them to mount quickly and come on up the valley."

"Come, Marcelite" and the two girls dashed away at the full speed of their horses.

They were compelled to leave their horses before reaching the spot, on account of the uneven nature of the ground, and Sue said, as she threw her rein, to her friend:

"Here, Marcelite, you wait here, please, for I'll stop that trouble!"

She glided forward as she spoke, overheard the words, saw the situation at a glance, and appeared upon the scene, her presence unsuspected until she faced the crowd, revolver in hand, as she placed herself by the side of Wild Bill!

She did not know that Marcelite had hastily tied the horses to a rock and had followed her. She, too, appeared taking her position on the other side of the scout!

The coming of the two young ladies, in the way they did, fell like a bombshell might have done among the miners, and every atom of fight was taken out of them.

The lawful men of the crowd greeted them with a rousing cheer, which was soon joined in by the others.

As for Mephisto Mike he was glad to see

a chance of escape, though Sue evidently recognized him as the leader, and her eyes flashed defiance upon him.

Thinking that he now saw his chance to get out of a bad scrape with some degree of honor, he said:

"We cannot go against you, Miss Sue, so passes."

"You are wise; but, what does this attack mean, Wild Bill, and it has not been a bloodless one I see?" and Sue glanced at the dead bodies of the unfortunate Hank Hull and Hercules Harry.

"It means that I arrested these deserters from the army, Miss Sue, acting under orders, and that the now dead man sought to rescue them, while Mephisto Mike, not profiting by their experience, still pressed me."

"He should thank you for saving his life, for, had you not come, he would have been a dead man now, though I, too, might have gone under, so you have done me a great service, miss."

"Well, there will be no more trouble, for here come the soldiers and my father is with them, I see."

"Mephisto Mike, you make a great mistake to bully a Government officer."

"Beg pardon, Miss Sue, but I didn't want to see the boys taken off to be hung, maybe."

"It is about all you can do to take care of your own neck," was Sue's retort.

Just then up came Miner Turpin, with the soldiers at his back, the corporal by his side, for they had dismounted from their horses.

"Men, if you are not satisfied, if these ladies will retire, we can settle the question of my right to arrest deserters right now," said Wild Bill, facing the crowd.

"Who disputes your right, Wild Bill?" cried Miner Turpin hotly.

"It seems no one now, sir, for Miss Sue and Miss Marcelite have stampeded the fighters," was the answer of Wild Bill, and he laughed as he saw Mephisto Mike and his immediate backers getting out of view behind the now thickly gathering crowd.

Miner Turpin was a power in Moonlight Valley, and his coming had a quieting effect, equaled only by the arrival of Sue and Marcelite, and the presence of the soldiers also poured oil upon the troubled waters, for the majority of the miners had no desire to resist authority, no matter what a few hot-heads might wish to do.

"Take your prisoners to camp, sergeant, and keep two men on duty constantly, one over these five men, the other to watch the camp."

"I will walk back with Miner Turpin, as soon as I have arranged for the burial of these bodies," said Wild Bill.

"Leave that to Vaughan, Wild Bill, for he will see to it—won't you Vaughan?" said Miner Turpin, addressing one of the men who answered:

"Oh, yes, sir, I'll see 'em planted O. K.; but, sergeant, you'd better unchain Hank now, for he'll nct get away," and the sergeant quickly removed the handcuffs from the dead man.

"You have done the camps a great service, Wild Bill, in killing Hercules Harry, while few will mourn for Hank Hull, for he was a bad one! but how did it all happen?" said Miner Turpin as they walked along back to the cabin accompanied by the two maidens, one of the soldiers leading their horses.

Wild Bill told the story of the affair in his modest way, and the miner said:

"Let me warn you to look out for Mephisto Mike, for he will strike you in the back if he can."

"He is one of the desperadoes on your list, and Hercules Harry was another, for he was the leader of the Owls, and Hank Hull was one of his gang, so you have done a fair day's work I think; but look out for Mephisto Mike for he is a bad one, and I heard several say you backed him down squarely, and that means he will seek revenge."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

A CHALLENGE ACCEPTED.

MARCELITE MONASTERY felt blue over the outcome of her having told Wild Bill what her father's orders had been to Lieutenant.

Valdos, and which had already resulted in the death of two men.

But, the daughter of the commandant, and frequently aiding him in his work, answering letters and dispatches, she had learned much of what duties he was expected to perform, and for years it was the desire of the Government to check desertion, when the temptation of the mines were at hand, especially as the men who deserted were the worst element in the army and became outlaws almost invariably.

Marcelite knew too that there was a renegade element among the Indians, that the commanders were anxious to lay a violent hand upon, as they urged the hostiles on to greater deeds of devilry than they would otherwise be guilty of.

The desperadoes of the mining camps and settlements were also another bad lot, so that Marcelite, having heard her father's talk with and instructions to lieutenant Valdos, felt justified in telling Wild Bill what that officer had been expected to accomplish on his visit to Moonlight Valley, the going with troops as an escort being the nominal work for which they were sent there.

The miner placed before Marcelite, as did also Sue and Wild Bill, that she but did her duty in telling the latter what had been the orders of Lieutenant Valdos, as that officer had not been able to inform the scout, and hence she should not feel blue over the fatal results.

The scout had said to her in his quiet way:

"You don't know what precious lives you may have saved, through my putting Hercules Harry out of the way, for he has a long list already to answer for, and if he killed Hank Hull with a stray shot, from all accounts it was a good deed to get rid of him too.

"Now you know, Miss Marcelite, that we men of the border, have to carry our lives in our hands, and in the discharge of duty must take big chances of being killed and stand ready to kill too, though wanton killing is to me the basest of crimes.

"Let a man kill a few desperadoes, in the discharge of duty, and to save his own life, or the lives of others, and before long he is branded as a man-killer, a name that no one who has a true heart cares to hear; but like the official executioner must stand ready to take life when the occasion demands it."

"You are right, Wild Bill, and your argument is a good one, for you have been one to suffer by just such reports, as I have heard you called the Wild West Duelist, the Man-Killer, the Deadly Duelist and by other names, and yet I have never heard of your taking a life that it was not forced upon you," said Hugh Turpin.

"Yes, and will have to do the same thing again and again, as long as I lead this wild life," said Wild Bill in a tone of extreme sadness; but in an instant his manner changed and he added:

"No, no, Miss Marcelite, don't you feel blue over the death of any man whom your telling me my orders caused me to kill, and who was, really speaking, tree fruit, from the crimes he was guilty of.

"Now I must go up to the city to look around."

"You will take some of your soldiers with you, Wild Bill?" said Sue.

"Oh, no, miss, for that would surely cause trouble, as it would be said that I was afraid to go alone, and was looking for a fracas.

"Why, they'd doubtless tell me to come and get you and Miss Marcelite to protect me," and the scout smiled, while Miner Turpin said:

"You are right, Bill, it would cause trouble to take your men, for there is a very ugly element in these mines, and this afternoon's arrest has started the fire."

Wild Bill soon after left the cabin and wended his way on foot up to Mascot City.

The "city" was in full blast, for the occurrences of the afternoon had caused all the miners to assemble in the various saloons, at the Stage Coach Tavern, and in knots, discussing the affair.

Of course there were many who condemned Wild Bill, but they were of the never-do-well kind, the industrious miners supporting him, and praising the pluck of Sue Turpin and Marcelite.

The discussions, fired by liquor, ran hot, and when Wild Bill dropped into "The Exchange," as the main gambling and drinking saloon was known, he found that there had already occurred one killing scrape, and another in which a participant had been badly wounded.

The "hero" in each case was Mephisto Mike, and he was enjoying a game of cards when Wild Bill sauntered into the saloon.

Flushed with his deeds, and half full of liquor, the moment his eyes fell upon the scout he dropped his cards and called out in a voice that silenced all noise:

"Ho, Wild Bill, you have come to have out your quarrel with me, I suppose?"

"I have no quarrel with you, unless you see fit to make one," was the calm reply.

"Well, I do see fit to demand an apology for your insulting me this afternoon, or give me satisfaction."

"I have no apology to offer, but all the satisfaction you may desire."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

BROUGHT TO TERMS.

THE trouble which had ended in Mephisto Mike killing one man and wounding another, had originated in the fact that several miners had criticised his interfering with the arrest of the deserters.

They upheld the scout and said that he had done just right in killing Hercules Harry, and added but for Sue Turpin's timely arrival, the scout would have killed Mephisto Mike.

The latter was quickly told of what had been said, and he at once decided that such a feeling was dangerous to get abroad, that it must be checked at once.

There was but one way to check it, and that was by silencing the tongues that had dared offend him.

Fortifying himself with a couple of glasses of "poison," as the liquor in Mascot City was not inappropriately named, he went to The Exchange, and went with blood in his eye.

In less than five minutes after his arrival a dead form lay upon the floor, and a badly-wounded man was being borne away by his comrades, while Mephisto Mike, with a red scar on his cheek, where a bullet had cut its way, sat down to play a game of cards.

The wound in his cheek, as close a call as it had been for life, he did not appear to heed, and played his games with fortune coming his way, having taken another drink "for luck," as he expressed it.

The moment he beheld the tall form, and handsome, stern and cynical face of Wild Bill, it aroused the Satan in his nature, and he had hurled down a challenge for an apology or a fight.

What he wanted an apology for was not exactly clear, but he wanted it, and, like a Texan when he wants his revolver, he "wanted it bad."

When Wild Bill entered every eye was upon him, and many drew a long breath, for they felt that another tragedy was to be enacted.

Why had not the scout stayed away? some asked.

Had he come there for a personal encounter?

Yet, why should he hide himself in a free country, and was he not entitled to go where he pleased?

The truth was Wild Bill had gone in the discharge of his duty.

He was on the trail of the desperadoes Lieutenant Valdos had been given orders to hunt down.

He wished to find them, to spot them, to track them, so that when the time came to act he could do so.

The crowd became breathless with expectation, as Wild Bill replied to the challenge of Mephisto Mike, and all eyes were upon him alternately with the desperado.

The latter at once attempted to draw his revolver, but he was covered with a quickness that brought a cheer from the crowd.

How Wild Bill did it no one saw, or knew, but Mephisto Mike had a revolver leveled at his head in the twinkling of a second, while the scout called out sternly:

"Hold, no game of life and death here in this crowd, for like Hercules Harry, an-

other cowardly bully of your stripe, you will wound or kill an innocent man."

Cheers greeted this announcement, and Mephisto Mike turned livid with rage, while he said fiercely:

"You said you would meet me, and now back down because you have the drop on me."

"You are a liar, for I do not back down, but say that if you wish to meet me it must be fair and square, so choose your seconds, and, as I have no friend here, I must ask a kindness on the part of some one."

Another cheer greeted the words of the scout, and it was very evident that his stock was rapidly rising above par.

Cornered as he was, by his challenge, and its prompt acceptance, Mephisto Mike called out:

"Drop your revolver from covering me, and I'll talk to you."

"Don't trust him," came in a chorus of voices.

"I will trust him, for I have confidence that there are too many honorable men about me, not to kill him on the spot, did he shoot me down."

Loud rung the cheers at this trust in the crowd, and many voices called out:

"You bet you can trust us, and he shall act square."

Wild Bill, on this pledge, which seemed to have come from two-thirds of those present, at once lowered his revolver and said:

"I thank you, gentlemen."

"Now who will act for me?"

A score of men sprung forward, but recognizing one he knew to be a friend of Miner Turpin, the scout said:

"Thank you, I will accept your services, so please find out what the pleasure of Mephisto Mike is?"

"He has taken Red Hand Romeo for his second, and says that he will meet you tomorrow some time," was the answer.

"He has also asked Dick Dash, the Dead-shot Duelist of the mines to help Red Hand," reported another miner.

"Then I will ask you also to aid my friend here, and I shall be pleased to see both the seconds you named, but the fight shall take place at once, for I am the challenged party."

In vain did Mephisto Mike try to put it off until the morrow, for Wild Bill would not hear to it, and he was forced to come to the scout's terms as the challenged party.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

FATAL PRELIMINARIES.

IT was no easy task to bring Mephisto Mike to terms, for he had decided that as it was to be a duel, and not an encounter on the spur of the moment, he would put off the meeting until the morrow.

That there was some trick in this all who knew the desperado felt assured, and hoped that Wild Bill would not yield.

Mephisto Mike had first selected one second, Red Hand Romeo, and then, as there entered the saloon Dick Dash he also was chosen.

These two seconds were as well-known in the mines as was Mephisto Mike, and even more to be feared.

They also had a "record" as man-killers, and an encounter with them was always regarded, as in Mephisto Mike's case, as fatal to their adversary.

Red Hand Romeo was a gentlemanly looking fellow, though his face bore the stamp of crime.

It was thought that he had once been a clergyman, and afterward had turned actor, to in the end develop into a most desperate man.

His manners were courtly, refined at times, and he seemed to know the Bible by heart, while he often spouted Shakespeare—Romeo and Juliet being his favorite.

Something had imbittered his past life, for he had once been heard to remark bitterly when under the influence of liquor:

"A man branded as I am, with a brand that stamps me as a Cain, had no right in the pulpit, and was derided on the stage, so I took up the pursuit of man-killing, for which nature intended me," and he held up his hand with the red birthmark covering it to the wrist.

As it was his left hand, and he always used this one in firing a revolver or using a knife, he was the more feared, though he would write with his right hand, and he wrote well too.

He dressed well, and passed his time in hunting, fishing, gambling, for he paid others to work his mine for him.

The other second chosen by Mephisto Mike was a gambler pure and simple.

He dressed as no other man in the mines dared do, like a gentleman, wore handsome clothes, a white silk negligee shirt, gray slouch hat, diamonds, and sported kid gloves.

He defiantly carried large sums of money about with him, and said that his will would be found upon his body, leaving his wealth to his slayer, as the man who killed him would do him a favor in ending his life, though he fought like a tiger for it when in danger.

He was known in the mines as Dick Dash, the Gambler Duelist, and he was said to always fight by the code, and to have run up a list of victories he could not count upon the fingers of both hands, including the thumbs.

Neither he nor Red Hand Romeo, though comrades, had ever cared for the companionship of Mephisto Mike, Hercules Harry and desperadoes of their stripe, having stood aloof from them, but, when called upon by Wild Bill's challenger to mortal combat, for some reason, known only to themselves, they had both promptly accepted.

It was Red Hand Romeo who approached Wild Bill and said in his most courtly way:

"Pardon me, sir, but I come from my friend, Mephisto Mike—shades of the immortal Shakespeare defend me from such a name!—to learn your wishes for this meeting to-morrow with him."

"You are misinformed, sir, for the meeting is for to-night; and I refer you to my friend here," coolly said Wild Bill.

"But, sir, my friend with the diabolically Irish name insists upon to-morrow."

"You are known as one of the Desperado Duelists of the Mines, I believe, for I have so heard you spoken of?"

"I have that honor, sir."

"Then you should know that the challenged party has the right to appoint time, weapons and place of meeting."

"You are right, sir; but, here in the mines, we are not sticklers for such fine points of etiquette in the duello."

"I am a stickler for justice, and I shall insist upon my rights, knowing the kind of a man I have to deal with."

"I will consult my brother second, sir," and Red Hand Romeo walked away.

Going apart with Mephisto Mike and Dick Dash, the three held a whispered conversation for some time, and then the latter came up the saloon to where Wild Bill was waiting.

"Pardon me, you are Wild Bill, the Duelist Scout, I believe, sir?" he said in a gentlemanly way.

"My name is James Hickok, though in border nomenclature I have won the title of Wild Bill, but I lay no claim to the title of the Wild West Duelist from having had to kill a few cowardly desperadoes for the good of a community."

The reply was calmly uttered, but stinging, and Dick Dash colored slightly, but said:

"You are well known to us, sir, and I honor a brave man; but just now I represent Mephisto Mike, and he demands that his meeting with you should be put off until to-morrow."

"As the party who has the right, I decline, sir."

"May I ask why, sir?"

"I sought no quarrel with your principal; I was interfered with by him when in the discharge of duty, and coming here to-night he deemed himself insulted, and demanded an apology."

"Of course I refused an apology, but am willing to give him all the satisfaction he deems necessary for the good of his health; so stop this delaying matters, arrange with the two gentlemen here who represent me, and let the matter be settled at once, otherwise I shall take affairs in my own hands and settle it to please myself."

There was no doubting this way of putting the case by Wild Bill, so Dick Dash re-

turned to his comrades, and after a few minutes more came back to the scout's seconds and arranged that the meeting should take place right there in the saloon, and all other preliminaries were soon entered into for the fatal duel, for how could it be otherwise than that one or both should fall, was the thought that flashed through the mind of all.

CHAPTER XL.

A DOUBLE DUEL.

GAMBLING, almost drinking, had been forgotten in The Exchange, in the interest felt by all the miners in the duel between Wild Bill and Mephisto Mike.

The scout's name was known to every one there, and his record as a brave man and a dead shot was unquestioned.

He was known as a splendid scout, trailer and Indian-fighter, and as one who had never flinched from any duty.

Then too in his affair with Hercules Harry in the afternoon those who had been witnesses of it vouched for the scout's iron nerve through all, and that he had sent his bullet squarely between the eyes of the bully.

Of course there was a local pride felt by some in Mephisto Mike, others were indifferent, and still more were anxious to have the scout the victor.

There was a hatred felt by many for just such men as Hercules Harry, Mephisto Mike, Red Hand Romeo, Dick Dash and those who composed the band of Outlaw Owls, and they would be glad to see them removed from what they, the lawless lot, considered their field of usefulness in the mines.

Wild Bill was wholly unmoved in appearance, chatted quietly with those about him, and turned to his seconds when they announced how the preliminaries had been arranged.

"We have decided that each one of you stand apart the length of the saloon, facing the wall, the distance being fifty paces, and the lamps hanging along the center from the roof will give you light to see how to aim," said one of Wild Bill's seconds, while the representatives of Mephisto Mike stood by.

"There will be no objection by the landlord, I hope, for if Mephisto Mike breaks a lamp or two by wild shooting I will pay the bill," said Wild Bill.

"And he will offer to bury you decently," suggested Red Hand Romeo.

"Thanks, and you are all invited to the funeral; but what else, pard?" and the scout turned again to his second.

"I have won the toss-up for the word, and I will call out as follows:

"Ready! Right about wheel!

"Forward march!

"When you have both advanced ten paces, I will give the word:

"Fire!"

"From that moment you can advance, firing at will.

"Do you understand, sir?"

"Perfectly."

"The crowd will range themselves upon either side, and should be in no danger certainly, for this saloon is sixty feet wide."

"Is this satisfactory, sir?" asked Dick Dash, with the sneering smile that seemed natural to him.

"I could ask no more, sir."

"You are at last content, then?" said Red Hand, in a tone so insulting that all noticed it and awaited Wild Bill's answer.

It came with the calmness natural to him when deeply moved:

"I could only ask one greater joy, Red Hand."

It was a cut at his red hand, his crimes, and it was meant, and understood, for the desperado flushed and asked quickly:

"And what is that, scout?"

"That you were in Mephisto Mike's place."

The shot told and men cheered, while Red Hand Romeo turned white but made no reply.

He had called forth an attack by his insulting manner toward the scout, and he had been very quickly silenced.

The two seconds chosen by Wild Bill were of the better class of miners, men who were law-abiding, hard working and anxious only to see justice done a stranger.

When Wild Bill had agreed to the terms they went with the seconds of Mephisto Mike and heard the arrangements placed before him.

When asked if he was satisfied he answered impatiently:

"Oh, yes, and it's a great deal of bother I go to just to kill a scout, even if his name is Wild Bill."

As the principals had agreed to the terms, and the landlord raised no objection to furnishing the dueling-ground, the crowd quickly ranged themselves along the sides, three deep, for three-fourths of the population of Mascot City was now gathered in the long cabin known as The Exchange.

The bar was upon one side, opposite the entrance to the building, there was a dirt floor, with log walls, rough boarded roof and rudely-made tables and benches.

Scores of shooting scrapes had occurred there, and nearly every foot of the dirt flooring had drank up the life-blood of some poor unfortunate victim of man's inhumanity to man.

In front of the bar still lay the body of the man whom Mephisto Mike had killed an hour before, a ghastly warning to the two who were now to face each other.

Led by one of his seconds, Wild Bill walked leisurely to his position, every eye upon him, while Mephisto Mike was escorted by Dick Dash.

The other two seconds took their stands in the center of the room, at the bar, Dick Dash resting one foot upon the dead body lying at his feet.

When the principals were in position, facing the wall, and with their backs to each other, the two seconds nearest to them stepped back to the line of the crowd.

Then came the call of Wild Bill's second standing by Dick Dash:

"Ready! Right about—wheel! forward! march!"

The two men obeyed promptly, Wild Bill with military precision, and as the steps were told off to ten, bringing them within thirty paces of each other, amid a silence that was death-like, the second called out:

"Fire!"

Mephisto Mike had anticipated the command a second or more, and his revolver was leveled by the time the word was uttered.

Wild Bill halted at the shot, and before a second pull on the trigger by Mephisto Mike, he answered.

When the puff of smoke cleared from the muzzle of Wild Bill's revolver, he saw the desperado lying upon his face, while quickly turning him over, as he ran to his side, Dick Dash called out:

"Dead! Shot between the eyes—a magnificent shot indeed!"

The board roof rattled as the words of Dick Dash brought forth a roaring cheer which was at once followed by hisses and groans from the admirers of Mephisto Mike.

"Don't cheer at a man's death, pards," came in Wild Bill's calm tones, and he spoke reprovingly, while Red Hand Romeo was seen coming quickly toward him and a cry of warning arose.

But, if the desperado meant to open fire, he was checked when he saw the ugly looks about him, and that Wild Bill was on his guard, so he said, savagely:

"Now, scout, I am ready to step into Mephisto Mike's place and meet you."

"Is this a challenge?"

"Certainly, for it means your life or mine."

"I am willing—let the same terms govern us," said Wild Bill, sadly.

CHAPTER XLII.

THE MINER'S DEMAND.

RED HAND ROMEO certainly showed his pluck, in the challenge he threw at Wild Bill, after the death of Mephisto Mike, and Hercules Harry the day before, especially as the scout had shown himself such a dead shot as to send the bullet between the eyes of his foe, each time.

Two such shots could not be accidental, but rather proved nerve and training under deadly fire, thought those who saw the astonishingly cool behavior of the scout.

When he answered the challenge of Red

Hand Romeo he did so in a tone of sadness that was marked by all who heard him, and saw his face.

He certainly was not a man who killed his fellows for a name as a killer.

He did not seek the ordeal of death to ruthlessly take life, yet met it unflinchingly once he entered upon the work.

"Who are your seconds?" asked Red Hand Romeo with a sneer.

"The same gentlemen who served me so well before, if they will oblige me once more," said the scout, glancing toward them.

They both stepped promptly forward, while another form appeared upon the scene and said sternly:

"This looks like pressing matters a little too far, gentlemen, and I will ask to take my friend's place in this meeting, as I know Red Hand Romeo has a grudge against me he would like to square."

The speaker was Hugh Turpin the miner. All knew him and that his record was a good one for pluck.

He had ever been most generous to his fellows, gave a helping hand to every man who needed aid, had never held himself as better than others, while, when put to the test, had shown himself fully capable of taking care of himself.

After an absence from the mines for some time, and returning with the name of being very rich, he had, so to speak, put on no airs, but was the same noble-hearted man as before.

When, years before, Red Hand Romeo had asked for the hand of Sue, girl though she was, Hugh Turpin had turned livid and made the response:

"I would rather kill my child with my own hand than see her wed such as you, and if ever you dare insult her again it will be your life or mine, Red Hand Romeo."

Since that day the two had never spoken, and that was what Hugh Turpin alluded to when he said that the desperado had a grudge against him he would like to settle.

Why Red Hand Romeo had never resented the words of the miner was one of the mysteries which no one could fathom.

The miner had followed Wild Bill up to Mascot City, and had taken a position where he was not noticeable, so had seen and heard all that had passed.

Now he came up to the scout and boldly asked to take his place in the duel with Red Hand Romeo.

All were surprised, for the miner was one to avoid a personal difficulty as far as lay honorably in his power to do so.

"You here, Mr. Turpin?" exclaimed Wild Bill, in surprise.

"Yes, and I ask to take your place against that man."

"That I cannot think of."

"Well, if you do not kill him he has to face me, and I'll avenge you."

"Permit me to be your second?"

"With the permission of my two friends here, certainly."

Both of the miners were glad to have the scout also seconded by Miner Turpin and said so, while Red Hand Romeo coming forward said:

"Did I understand, Turpin, that you wish to take this man's place in this duel?"

"So I said."

"I am content to let you come first, if he is."

All noted the significance with which the desperado pronounced the word first!

"But I am not, and as I come first, there will be no need of Miner Turpin making useless plans to meet you."

This cool rejoinder of the scout created an impression on all, for it showed that he spoke with significance also.

"Ah, you think so, do you, Wild Bill?" smiled the desperado, and turning to Dick Dash he continued:

"Let me ask you, pard, if I may request two more friends to act with you, for the scout has three?"

"Certainly, who do you name?" answered Dick Dash indifferently.

"Broncho Charlie and Silver Sam."

"Of the Outlaw Owls gang," said Hugh Turpin aloud, while Dick Dash remarked in an emphatic tone:

"Good men, both of them."

"Come, pards, and we will arrange for another fatal meeting."

As the two men stepped out of the crowd and joined Dick Dash, Red Hand Romeo said:

"One moment please, Turpin?"

"What is it?"

"May I ask why you have come here to pick a quarrel with me to-night?"

"You have said aright, for I did come to seek a quarrel with you," was the quiet reply.

"And why?"

"This letter," and Hugh Turpin took a letter from his pocket and holding it up, continued:

"This letter, which you, a cowardly desperado, a cut throat and fugitive from justice, dared write to my daughter, as boldly as you, three years ago, had the audacity to ask me to allow her to become your wife."

"You have repeated the offense, and I warned you when you did it would be your life or mine."

The desperado looked as though he was going to draw his revolver, but he knew that to shoot down Hugh Turpin, if he could do so, would be to turn every miner against him.

So he asked:

"Where did you get that letter?"

"My daughter gave it to me with the remark that when she met you she would lay her whip across your face for the insult."

"An insult to ask her to be my wife?"

"For such a creature as you are, yes."

"I will attend to you upon getting through with this man," and turning to his companions he asked:

"Is all ready for the duel, Dick?"

"Yes; it is to take place in Moonlight Valley to-night."

CHAPTER XLII.

TREACHERY PUNISHED.

WITH the exception of the location the arrangements for the second meeting were to be the same as for the first.

Gambling and drinking were forgotten in the more intense excitement of the duels, and the miners stood gazing at Wild Bill with an admiring awe for the man that was so utterly devoid of fear.

Before leaving the saloon, Red Hand Romeo stepped to one side and held a minute's whispered conversation with Dick Dash, and the latter was seen to shake his head as though opposing his friend's intention.

Then Red Hand was heard to say:

"You know you are my heir, Dick—all I have going to you if I fall, only don't flatter yourself that you will get it soon, for I have not the remotest idea of dying. I feel in a mood to kill to-night."

"So did Mephisto Mike," was the ominous response of Miner Turpin, who then called out:

"Come, Dick Dash, let us toss up for the word," said Turpin, upon arriving at the dueling ground.

"With pleasure," and the Desperado Duellist stepped forward, took a gold coin from his pocket and called out:

"Heads or tails, Turpin?"

"Heads!"

Up went the coin and falling, a chorus of voices called out:

"Tails!"

"You have won the word, Dash."

"Yes, Turpin, a turn about is fair play, for your side had it last time," Dick said.

Two of the other scouts then stepped forward and the principals were escorted to their places, Wild Bill walking slowly, and his face showing signs of paleness, while he muttered to Dick Dash:

"Let us get through with this at once, for I am tired."

Dick Dash looked surprised but made no reply, and a moment after called out in the professional tones of one who knew his business well and had been in such scenes himself:

"Are the gentlemen ready?"

"Ready," answered the seconds nearest the two adversaries.

"Ready!"

"Right-about, wheel!"

"Forward!"

"March!"

The commands rung like an army officer on parade, and both men promptly obeyed. Wild Bill no longer moving like a laggard now.

"One two," and the steps were counted off until suddenly, in a louder tone, Dick Dash had the word Fire upon his lips, when the sharp report of Red Hand Romeo's revolver, who, like Mephisto Mike, had fired before the word, and quicker than the other gained a couple of seconds before his adversary's weapon rung out.

But Red Hand Romeo had been too eager to commit his act of treachery, to kill Wild Bill ere he could fire: his bullet merely plowed through the scout's broad-brimmed sombrero within an inch of his temple.

Hardly had the bullet touched the hat, however, when a savage cry followed Wild Bill's shot, which, with a crash, shattered the red hand that grasped the revolver, the weapon dropping to the floor, the arm falling to his side from the shock.

But, Red Hand Romeo showed his claim to pluck and nerve, for in a second he had drawn his second revolver, in his right hand, and threw it forward and pulled trigger.

All had seen Wild Bill lower his weapon from Red Hand Romeo's head to his hand, when he shattered it, and then he had hesitated, as though hoping that would end the affair, for he could have fired a couple of shots before Romeo got hold of his other revolver and loaded it.

The scout even took chances of the shot, for he pulled trigger only when his foe did.

Down in a heap went the desperado, while, going quickly to his side, Dick Dash called out:

"Dead!"

It was a yell of admiration that now broke forth from the crowd for Wild Bill, who said in a low tone:

"Now, Mr. Turpin, let us go, for that shot of Mephisto Mike hit me in the side, and I am faint from loss of blood."

"And you have not spoken of this before—here, Bostwick, you are a physician, so see to my friend," cried the miner.

Bostwick, who was both miner and the physician at Mascot City, came hastily forward—a tall, handsome fellow—and at once ordered a glass of liquor for the scout.

Then he threw open his clothing and saw a wound over the heart on the left side.

"Ah! well intended, but the bullet glanced on the rib, sir," he said as he ran his probe into the wound.

"And here is the bullet lodged here—I will cut it out," and Bostwick did so, the scout not flinching under the pain.

"It was a close call, Wild Bill, but it is not dangerous, though you have lost considerable blood, but I will dress the wound, and in a short while you will be all right again."

"Thank you, sir," said Wild Bill, who was weak from the pain and loss of blood.

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE WOUNDED SCOUT.

"I HOPE you are not seriously wounded, Mr. Hickok," said Dick Dash coming forward.

"Thank you, the doctor says not, though I bled so long I am weak."

"You were wounded by Mephisto Mike's shot, I am told."

"Yes, sir."

"You have nerve to face Red Hand Romeo after that; but, what became of his second shot?"

"It passed by my head and struck the wall."

"You shot to shatter his hand, I judge?"

"Yes, I seek to kill no man if it can be avoided."

"He deserved no mercy after his treachery in firing before the word. I should have shot him down for that," said Miner Turpin.

"Yes, I expected you would do so, for it was treachery in Romeo. He told me he intended to do so, and I warned him against it," said Dash.

"How long, Bostwick, before you can have your patient well again?"

"In a week or ten days," answered the doctor.

"All right; I will wait the latter time."

"What for, Dick Dash?" suddenly asked Hugh Turpin.

"Why, of course, I must not lose my laurels as the Desperado Duelist, and, having killed my friends, Wild Bill will certainly give me a game to see if he can hold trumps three successive times."

"Do you mean that you intend to force a quarrel upon Wild Bill?" sternly asked Miner Turpin.

"My dear Turpin, there is to be no quarrel; simply a meeting, for he has killed my pard Romeo, and I claim the right to avenge him, and to have a chance to hold my laurels as a gambler duelist, or lose them with my life."

"Surely Mr. Hickok will not refuse me the favor?"

Wild Bill smiled grimly and replied:

"I did not expect to have a killing picnic when I came here, but it seems the dueling fever has broken out, and as you seem to be suffering with the disease I will oblige you, yes, now, if you so desire."

"No! no! I would consider it murder to kill you when you are suffering from your wound."

"In ten days, say, we will settle it—good-night," and Dick Dash walked away and lighting a cigar at the bar had several men take up the bodies of Mephisto Mike and Red Hand Romeo and bear them to their cabins, to prepare them for burial.

Refusing aid offered by a number, to carry him to his camp, Wild Bill left the saloon, followed by the cheers of the crowd.

One miner had his horse there and insisted that Wild Bill should ride him, sending him back in the morning, and Doctor Bostwick suggested that it would be best that he should do so.

As he really felt quite weak, the scout consented, and mounting rode along the trail, Miner Turpin walking by his side.

"You must be my guest to night, Bill, for I have a spare cot for you in my room, and the girls would never forgive you, if you did not stop."

Thus urged by the miner Wild Bill consented and when they entered the cabin they found both Marcelite and Sue up to receive them.

A miner had passed half an hour before and told them just what had occurred at The Exchange, and the way he praised Wild Bill would have caused him to blush like a school-girl had he heard him.

"Well, Miss Marcelite, I have been getting into trouble again, and at one time I felt very like calling on you and Miss Sue to help me out," said the scout, as he sunk into a chair.

A late supper had been prepared for the miner and the scout, for they expected the latter might stop by, and the two really enjoyed it, though it could be seen that Wild Bill was weak and suffering, and he soon retired, while Miner Turpin made known to the young ladies the whole story of the affair.

"What a strange man the scout is!" said Marcelite.

"He is as gentle as a woman, big hearted, generous and shuns trouble, but he is as deadly as Death itself when forced to defend his life, and to discharge his duty."

"Yes, he is a strange combination of the lion and the lamb," remarked Sue.

"He has made a record here that will not soon be forgotten, and the way he has begun he is getting rid of the very men the lieutenant had orders to hunt down, for Hercules Harry, Mephisto Mike and Red Hand Romeo were the worst types of desperadoes, and Hank Hull was really one of the Outlaw Owls gang."

"Then he has the five deserters prisoners, and if he can kill that Desperado Duelist, Dick Dash, he will have put down the entire element of discord, death and devilry we have here."

"But can he get the best of the Desperado Duelist, father, for you know the name he has?"

"Yes, Sue, and you know the name that reptile Red Hand Romeo had, and you should have seen Wild Bill shatter his hand and then send a second shot between his eyes—I tell you, nothing disturbs the scout's serenity."

"But Dick Dash has the same reputation for coolness and deadly aim, and you know

about the pitcher that went once too often to the well, father."

"True, and my opinion is that Dick Dash will be the pitcher, Sue."

CHAPTER XLIV.

AN OUTLAW'S REMEMBRANCE.

WILD BILL awoke in the morning with a sickening remembrance of the scenes of the night before, and the acts that had been forced upon him to do.

He felt well, save for the stiffness and soreness of the bullet wound, and the gash cut to extract the bullet.

Doctor Bostwick was on hand to dress his wounds, and told him that they were doing well, he had no fever, and that in a few days he would be himself again.

The sergeant also called to see how he was, having heard the whole story, and said how delighted he would be if he only could have gone up with his men and opened fire on the whole outfit.

"I might have killed some innocent men, sir, but it would have been upon the principle of being caught in bad company, while their loss would have been slight in comparison with the good done in thinning out the desperadoes."

"We cannot do the work by wholesale, sergeant," said Wild Bill with a smile.

"No, sir, I suppose not; but you are retailing them off in fine shape, if some stray bullet don't hit you."

"But I must take the chances, you know."

"It seems that more chances fall to your lot, sir, than there should be; but let me tell you that I believe the Outlaw Owls intend to attempt a rescue of the prisoners."

"Indeed?"

"Well, sir, I have seen a number of men about, say half a dozen, and one man told me they belonged to the Outlaw Owls gang."

"Well, keep your eyes open then, and see that no one is allowed to come into camp."

"I will, sir, but I hear that you are to fight the great gambler whom they call the Desperado Duelist."

"Yes, I am booked for it, I believe."

"He is a very desperate man, sir."

"So I have reason to believe."

"Can't I arrest him as a fugitive from justice, sir, and so end it?"

"Don't you know me better than that, sergeant?" reproachfully said Wild Bill.

"I was only thinking you had done your share sir, and the fact of your other duels would prove you were not afraid."

"Nor am I afraid of two Desperado Duelists, sergeant."

"He demands a meeting, and I must oblige him."

Breakfast was now ready, so Wild Bill went in and met Marcelite and Sue.

They insisted upon treating him as an invalid, and he could not resist them, so was cared for during the day as tenderly as though he had been a sick child.

In the afternoon he strolled over to the camp and was greeted with a cheer by the troopers.

He found all well there and on his way back saw a man in the timbers who beckoned to him.

Ever cautious, Wild Bill walked toward the man ready to greet friend or foe.

The man was in miner dress and crouched down behind a huge boulder, surrounded by a thicket.

"Don't yer know me, pard?" he said in a whisper.

Wild Bill looked closely at him a moment and memory recalled the man's face from the dim past.

"Am I mistaken in saying that you were once in the army?"

"I was, sir, and you risked your life to take me off the field when I was wounded in an Indian fight."

"Yes, I remember now, and we met again."

"Yes, sir, and if I have not forgotten the first time you saved me, my memory is not so bad as to forget the second."

"I saved you from the Vigilantes, I recollect."

"You did, sir, for they had me up as a horse-thief and were going to hang me."

"I was not guilty, but they thought so, and were going to hang me when you vouched for me."

"Yes; though I knew you had deserted I didn't wish to see you hanged when I felt you were innocent of that crime at least."

"I'll tell you, sir, I deserted to go home to my dying mother, for I could not get leave."

"It was a pity I did, sir, for she left me a snug little sum and I ran through it in a couple of years, prompted by my conscience which troubled me for deserting."

"Had I served out my time in the army all would have been well; but I didn't, and it put me on the road to ruin."

"I came West and began to redeem myself, when I was robbed of all I had laid by, and becoming a wanderer, I was picked up by the Vigilantes as a horse-thief."

"You saved my neck, sir; and then I turned to mining."

"I did well, but got an idea I could make money faster by gambling, so lost it all in a night."

"Then I became discouraged and the evil in me got the better hand, so I joined the Outlaw Owls."

"Ah! you are one of that desperado gang are you?"

"Yes, sir. Hercules Harry was our lieutenant, and Mephisto Mike our captain, while Hank Hull who was wiped out was a member."

"There are but seven of us left now, and it is of them I am going to tell you, for, as I said, I have not forgotten you, Wild Bill."

"Well?"

"The Outlaw Owls met last night and doomed you to death."

"A threatened man lives long, pard."

"Yes, sir, but they have planned to kill you, and I know the plan."

CHAPTER XLV.

THE PLOT TO KILL.

WILD BILL looked the self-confessed outlaw squarely in the face.

"You know the plot to kill me?" he repeated, as the man did not finish under his gaze.

"Yes, sir, and that is what I am going to tell you."

"Forewarned is being forearmed, pard."

"That is it and I wish to pay the debt of life I owe you."

"I appreciate it, and can help you in return."

"I do not wish that, sir, for I am twice a debtor to you now."

"Well, if you could, for services rendered me, get a pardon for desertion, and be allowed to serve your time out in the army, it would put you on the high road to start on an honest life once more."

"It would, sir, and happy would I be if I could do so."

"That rests with you, for I am sure you can get a pardon and be allowed to serve out your time."

"I hope so, sir, for when I left as I did, I had not drawn my pay for four years, preferring to get it all at the time I left, so it would be quite a nest-egg for me."

"It would, indeed; but now about this plot to kill me?"

"You have been riding down to the Miners' Delight Mine of Mr. Turpin?"

"Yes."

"You go through what they call Zigzag Canyon, on account of its devious course?"

"Yes."

"Well, sir, a man is to be kept on the watch for you, and when you go again, he will notify the Owls, and they will hasten to the center of the canyon and go into ambush."

"Yes, it is a fine place for that kind of work."

"They will lasso you, drag you from your horse, and then hang you; that's the plan."

"Of course I am to be along, for not a soul suspects me; but warning you as I do, I can now keep you out of the trap, for you won't go."

Wild Bill was silent a moment, and a strange expression crept over his face as he was lost in thought.

At last he spoke and said:

"Pard, I will consider that you wish to become honest, and I so look upon you."

"Do any of your comrades wear a hat like yours?"

"No, sir; only one like this came out to the store in the lot, and I bought it," and the man took off his hat, which was of red felt.

"All right. You stick to that hat when you go to ambush me in the canyon, and I won't forget it."

"Let me also tell you that I will go to Miners' Delight Mine day after to-morrow, in the afternoon, and your shadower of me can so report to the Owls."

"You certainly will not go, now that I have warned you, Wild Bill!"

"I certainly will; but I won't forget that you wear a red sombrero, or one that was red before it became so soiled."

"They will kill you, sir, for I can do nothing. If I pleaded for you they would quickly consider me a traitor and make short work of me."

"I'll take all chances on the killing; and, what is more, I will not expect you to say a word in my behalf, nor will I do or say anything to betray you for your kindness to me."

"If I remember, your name is Jessop?"

"Yes, sir, Jim Jessop."

"All right, Jessop. Stick to your good resolution and I will not desert you."

"Now, don't forget that I go to the mine, passing through Zigzag Canyon day after to-morrow in the afternoon."

"Yes, sir," and the man looked a trifle bewildered, but, after a few mere words, Wild Bill went on to the miner's cabin.

Miner Turpin had a dozen claims, nearly all of which were paying well, and he had asked Wild Bill to look after one for him each day while he was there, noting the returns, as he had not time to go the rounds of all, and he was preparing to sell his interests there in the valley and wished to know just what the production of each one was.

This mine was apart from the others, and half a dozen miles away.

No other was near it, and the dozen miners who worked it, camped near it, and, excepting than and the owner, no one else ever went through Zigzag Canyon.

There was plenty of game beyond the canyon, and Miner Turpin felt that Wild Bill would enjoy a hunt while also doing him a service.

Zigzag Canyon was a crevice in the rocks, half a mile in length, very narrow and with huge slabs, squares and pieces of rock fallen from the cliffs strewing the way upon either side.

It was near the center of the canyon that James Jessop had told the scout was the place selected for the ambuscade, and certainly a good place it was for just such work.

In spite of the warning given him, Wild Bill did not seem to heed danger, for upon the second day, as he had said, after dinner, he mounted his horse and rode in the direction of Miner's Delight Mine.

He rode through Zigzag Canyon very slowly, took in all the good situations for an ambush, and then continued on to the mine.

His wounds were still sore, but rapidly healing, and he felt even then ready for a death-struggle should it come to that, though of course he was weak from loss of blood the night of his double duels.

After an hour spent at the Miners' Delight Mine, talking with the foreman, he mounted his horse and calmly rode away upon his return, entering Zigzag Canyon apparently without fear.

CHAPTER XLVI.

SURPRISED!

WILD BILL rode leisurely along through Zigzag Canyon, the expression on his face a study, for any one who had been there to behold it.

His eyes scanned the rocks ahead, though he did not appear to be watchful, and rode along with his hands resting upon the horn of his saddle, the rein hanging loose, his horse in a walk.

He was nearing the spot which he had selected, when passing through several hours before, as the very place for an ambush, and a grim smile flitted over his face.

A moment after there came a puff of smoke from over the top of a boulder, there port of a rifle and his horse fell heavily, shot through the head.

At the same instant came flying toward him two snake-like coils, and the nooses of a couple of lassoes settled over the scout's head and shoulders, and he was pinioned in the coils, as he caught nimbly on his feet when his horse went down under him.

To draw a revolver with his arms thus pinioned by the lariats, without considerable of a struggle would have been impossible, as well as that he had heard the stern command:

"Resist, and you are a dead man!"

The scout had not attempted any resistance.

The killing of his horse seemed to be a surprise to him, but he had simply caught on his feet and made not the slightest effort to resist, and serenely faced the gang of men who now dashed out from among the rocks and surrounded him.

"Well, pard, you have got me foul," he said quietly, and he gazed over the crowd of faces.

"Yer bet we has got yer foul, Wild Bill, and we intends ter run ther game out," said the leader, and whom Wild Bill recognized now as one of the seconds of Red Hand Romeo in his duel.

"What game are you playing?"

"Ther game of death, and we holds trumps."

Wild Bill smiled, and his eyes met those of the man in the red sombrero, but he showed no sign of recognition. Jessop seemed ill at ease and was very pale.

"Do you know that I am a Government officer?"

"We don't mind that, nor care for the Government."

"What do you want with me, for I haven't got much money along with me."

"What you has got we wants; but, that hain't all."

"What else?"

"Revenge."

"What for?"

"The killin' of our cap'n, our lieutenant and one of our gang, for he was kilt when you was being shot at."

"Well, play your game, so I can see your hands."

"Yer takes it cool, but that won't save yer."

"What will?"

"Nothin'."

"Do you intend to kill me?"

"You bet we does, for ef we didn't our lives wouldn't be worth nothin'."

"When am I to die?"

"Now, for we has all the arrangements made."

"Does yer see that tree?"

He pointed to a lightning-riven pine growing among the rocks, and which leaned half over the canyon.

Hanging over a limb of it was a lasso, a small noose in one end, the other held by one of the outlaws.

"Yes, I see it."

"Well, there you has got ter hang."

"All right; start the game so I can play my hand."

The men looked at the scout in surprise, and then at each other.

He was as cool as an icicle, and had shown no atom of fear of the fate he was threatened with, though that they meant to hang him he had not the slightest doubt.

"Say, pard, I guess we better let up after all, now we has given him a scare," said Jim Jessop anxiously.

"Let up nothin'! He dies!"

"Put that noose over his neck—oh God!"

The cry of the ringleader was choked by the death rattle, as a bullet pierced his heart, for a shot rung out with many an echo in the canyon, and around the bend in each direction dashed a party of men.

One was led by Kit Carrol the scout, and they were four miners from the Miners' Delight Mine, while the others, coming from the direction of Moonlight Valley, were half a dozen troopers under the lead of Sergeant Dean.

The outlaws were surprised beyond expression, but, seeing their leader fall, and expecting no mercy, they seized their revolvers and opened fire.

"Fall where you are, close to me!"

The order was given by the scout, and in a low tone; but it reached the ears of the one to whom it was addressed, James Jessop.

Quickly he obeyed, and his comrades, seeing him fall, supposed that he was killed.

Quickly they sprung to the shelter of the rocks, and opened a hot fire upon the troopers in one direction, and the miners, led by Kit Carrol, in the other.

There was no avenue of escape for them, and they stood firmly their ground to fight to the end, for they felt that it would be the hangman's noose if they escaped the bullet.

The troopers and miners labored under the disadvantage of not daring to return the fire, for fear of killing their chief and the man in the red sombrero, for Wild Bill had warned them that he was not to be hurt, under any circumstances.

Quietly had the scout arranged the trap, sending Kit Carrol to the Miners' Delight Mine early in the morning, and to reconnoiter the Zigzag Canyon, and when he got there he found that he had a party of miners ready to aid him in entrapping the outlaws.

The sergeant and his men were told to come into Zigzag Canyon at such a time, and they had been prompt in obeying.

Rushing upon the outlaws, Kit Carrol and his men, with the sergeant and his troopers, had a short, sharp hand-to-hand fight of it.

"Spare those who cry for mercy!" shouted Wild Bill, but though he repeated the command several times, in the fierce onslaught he was unheard, or unheeded, for two of the troopers had been shot down, wounded, a couple of miners had been killed, and both Kit Carrol and the sergeant had each received a slight wound, so that blood was up to fighting heat, and the combat ended only when the last of the outlaws had been slain.

"Wiped out!"

"I had to fire, chief, when I saw that fellow drop the noose about your neck; but it saved expense to shoot them," said Kit Carrol, the scout, wiping the blood from a wound in his chest, while the sergeant came up nursing a wound in his arm, and reported:

"Two of Kit's party killed, sir, and two of my men wounded, but not seriously I hope, with scratches for the scout and myself."

"And the band wiped out—you have all done well, sergeant."

"Now free me of my bonds," said Wild Bill.

CHAPTER XLVII.

AFTER THE BATTLE.

BOUND with the lariats, Wild Bill had stood calmly watching the conflict, his eagle eyes taking in each phase of the situation.

He had noted the reckless dash of Kit and his miners, the reckless pluck of the sergeant and his men, and though regretting that there had been two valuable lives lost, and several men wounded, for the outlaws at bay had fought desperately, he could not but feel that a very bad lot of desperadoes had been wiped out, and it was worth the sacrifice, for the Outlaw Owls had been a dread to all honest men in the mines, and it was said that the most lawless deeds were traceable to them.

A secret band originally, they had gained such power through the fear they inspired, that they made no great effort to conceal who they were, and even the Vigilantes dared not attack them as a band.

When freed of his bonds Wild Bill said:

"Tie this man at my feet, Kit, for he is not dead, but laid down by my orders."

"He is to be kept a prisoner in camp until we leave the valley."

"Sergeant, let one of the miners here have one of your horses to ride after Doctor Bostwick at Mascot City, and have him at our camp by the time we get there."

"They shot my horse, you see, and I would surely have been hanged by them but for my rescue, which of course I relied upon, so made no resistance."

One of the men from Miner's Delight then hastily mounted the horse of a trooper and rode off to Mascot City to get the doctor, and leave word for the bodies of the outlaws to be sent after, while turning to Jim Jessop,

who was deathly pale at the fate he had escaped, Wild Bill said:

"It will be best to keep you a prisoner until we leave the mines, for there may be friends of the outlaws, who, suspecting you of being a traitor, would kill you."

"Oh, yes, sir, I am in your hands, and let all believe that I am really a prisoner," urged the man who was awed by his escape, for, after warning the scout of his danger, he feared after all that he had been entrapped and would be hanged.

"Bound by one of the troopers he was led away down the canyon to where the horses had been left, and then, with the scout, sergeant, Kit Carrol and the wounded soldiers, he mounted and rode on to the camp, several of the troopers and miners remaining with the dead bodies of the outlaws.

Just as they reached the camp Dr. Bostwick rode up, with the miner who had gone after him, and Miner Turpin, who had been told of the fight in Zigzag Canyon.

"My dear pard, again you have escaped—a special Providence seems to protect you," cried Hugh Turpin, grasping Wild Bill's hand.

"Oh, I was all right, sir, for I had it so arranged that I was in little danger."

"And you were captured by the Outlaw Owls?"

"Yes, they shot my horse and lassoed me, for I made no resistance, so, doctor, you will not have to do your work over again, as far as I am concerned."

"I am glad of it, for a struggle would have made it bad for you; but I'll look after your men now," and the miner doctor turned to the sergeant, who said:

"Mine is slight, sir, so look after my two boys, and Kit's face, for he don't wish his beauty spoilt."

"Why did you not ask me to aid you, Wild Bill?" reproachfully said Miner Turpin.

"I did not wish you to be involved in any trouble here, sir, that might work against you with the community, though I did get some of your men from Miners' Delight to aid me, and their being there will convince the men of the valley that the outlaws deserved just what they got."

"Yes, and my fondest anticipation had not been for such a result—only one of the gang left."

"Don't censure him, Mr. Turpin, for he saved my life, for he it was who gave the warning, for we are old pards, and I only now hold him a prisoner as a blind, for he goes back to the fort with me and re-enters the army, for he is a deserter, and has not led the life of a saint since; but then he will come out all right in the end."

"I am glad to hear this, and will keep his secret; but I do wish the meeting with Dick Dash could be avoided."

"It may be best to continue the wiping out business, Mr. Turpin, while my hand is in," said Wild Bill with a smile, but with no bravado of manner.

"Now, let us see how our boys are?"

The report of the doctor was encouraging, for one of the soldiers had been wounded in the shoulder, but not seriously, and another in the hip, one an ugly-looking flesh wound, yet not dangerous.

Kit's wound in the face was soon stitched up, and the doctor said would not leave much of a scar, while the sergeant had gotten a bullet through the fleshy part of the arm, but the horse was not hurt.

"All Mascot City is going out to the canyon, so I will go along too and give my version of the affair, while you go up to the cabin, Wild Bill, and show the girls you are not hurt, and you need rest, too," said Mr. Turpin, and mounting his horse he rode off with the corporal and a couple of soldiers, who were going to the canyon after their comrades left there, while the scout went on up to the cabin and in his modest way related the story of the affair to Marcelite and Sue.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

THE DESPERADO DUELIST.

THERE was a large crowd of miners who visited the Zigzag Canyon that afternoon, and many breathed more freely when they heard that the Outlaw Owls had been wiped out, all save one.

There were many questions as to who that one was, and dark threats were made about taking him out and hanging him, so that not one of the gang would be left.

Miner Turpin had told the story over and over again, as he knew it, and his word went a long way with some.

Then, too, the miners who had come from Miners' Delight and were participants in the combat, told how Wild Bill had been on the very verge of being hanged when they came up.

In some way it was said the scout had overheard the plot to entrap him and had plotted to surprise the plotters.

The verdict of the miners was that the dead outlaws should be buried right where they fell in Zigzag Canyon, and the two men from the mine who had fallen in the battle, should be borne to Mascot City and buried with honor on the following day, which was the Sabbath day, when most all knocked off work and took it as a day of rest and recreation.

Several had made remarks in the crowd, about Wild Bill's coming there to leave a red trail behind him, and that he should be halted, as he had gone far enough, but the response they met with quickly silenced the lawless ones who began to feel that outlawry was getting a black eye in the Moonlight Valley camps.

Those inclined to make ugly remarks were further silenced by the shout that rose to go to the soldiers' camp and hang the one who was left of the outlaw band.

The soldier's had returned to their camp, and Miner Turpin had gone back to his home and was seated upon the piazza with Marcelite, Sue and Wild Bill, when a horseman was seen approaching at a run.

He was splendidly mounted upon a jet-black horse, his saddle and bridle were silver-mounted, and he rode superbly.

A man of fine form and handsome face, he was one to command admiration from any one, especially as he was dressed in a stylish riding suit of blue velvet, white corduroy pants, military boots with gold spurs, a Mexican, gold embroidered sombrero, white silk shirt with a black scarf knotted under the broad collar, and wore a ring and breast-pin worth a small fortune.

"What a splendid looking man," cried Marcelite, as he came along the trail.

"And how well he rides."

"It is Dick Dash, the Desperado Duelist, and gambler," said Sue.

"What! that man a desperado, Mr. Turpin?"

"Yes, Miss Marcelite, he is so called, and yet he is no common one, for he is a gentleman in appearance, a man of education with refined tastes, yet a professional gambler.

"He holds himself aloof from those who are desperadoes in the common acceptation of the term, yet he has killed more men than any man in the mines, but never wantonly, and he is brave and chivalrous beyond a doubt, but as dangerous as death—see, he is coming here."

As the miner spoke Dick Dash wheeled out of the valley trail and came on up to the cabin, but at a slower pace.

Reining his horse to a halt, he took his sombrero off and bent low and gracefully in a salute to Marcelite and Sue, while he said courteously:

"I have not before had an opportunity, Miss Turpin, to welcome you back to Moonlight Valley, though long ago we were friends."

"Thank you, Dick Dash," said Sue, in her old way of speaking.

"It is a pleasure to get back, I assure you."

"Let me present you to my friend, Miss Monastery."

He sat on his horse with head uncovered still, and bowing low, said:

"It is an honor to meet any friend of the Mascot of Moonlight Mountains, Miss Monastery, especially for one who, like myself, is an outcast and wears the indelible brand of desperado."

"Miner Turpin, I congratulate you upon having your daughter and her friend with you, and Mr. Hickok, I sincerely hope that you are rapidly improving, while I may offer you my congratulations also, on your escape a few hours ago."

"Thank you, sir, had I not been prepared it would have gone hard with me," politely responded Wild Bill, while both Marcelite and Sue regarded the man in sad surprise that he, fitted by nature to adorn any society, and sure to command admiration and respect, should be what he was.

From the same motive which had prompted Sue Turpin to present him to Marcelite, Miner Turpin now said:

"Will you not dismount, Dash, and join us, for supper will be ready after awhile, and you know my latch-string hangs outside for my friends."

"For your friends, yes, Mr. Turpin," was the bitter reply.

"But I have not the honor of such a claim, though you and the Mascot were wont to be ever kind to me in the long ago."

"I am what I am, and though wicked now, I was not always so and I knew full well when first I saw you that you came not here to hide from justice, that you were not one of the outcast kind, and so I never pressed my company upon you, nor did I force myself upon you to welcome Miss Sue back again, though God knows I am glad of the sunshine of her presence here, for we are all better for it."

"I am not here now to seek hospitality, but to warn Mr. Hickok that the miners are so pleased with his work of extermination that they are all anxious to do more, so are coming to take his prisoners away from him, the deserters, and the remnant of the outlaw band, and hang them all."

"Ha! is this so?" cried Miner Turpin.

"It is, sir, and for it to be done would detract from the honor Mr. Hickok has won here, and a blow at the Government, to take its prisoners from United States troops, so I come to give you the warning, and offer my services in aiding Mr. Hickok to stand the mob off."

CHAPTER XLIX.

THE MASCOT WINS.

THE tidings brought by the Desperado Duelist were startling in the extreme.

To have his prisoners taken from him and birched would dim the honor of his victory over vice, and bring the army into contact with the miners.

It would never do, Wild Bill fully understood, and from his inmost heart he thanked the gambler for the warning given him.

Of course, to resist, with the mob at fever heat, would bring on a conflict, a few soldiers against hundreds of desperate men.

But Wild Bill would resist, and he said:

"See here, Pard Dash, you have done a very friendly act toward me, and I assure you I appreciate it."

"And more, I will accept your kind offer of aiding me, for well I know your influence here."

"I am at your service, and you have about twenty minutes to prepare, I should say, for the crowd is afoot you know, and I rode rapidly."

"Then we will go at once."

"And I with you," said Hugh Turpin.

"Father."

"Yes, Sue."

"There are eighteen soldiers, I believe, two horse-wranglers, Wild Bill and Kit Carrol, who, with yourself and Dick Dash, make twenty-four."

"Yes, Sue, yes."

"There are hundreds of miners, and they will not readily be intimidated, and that means bloodshed and the lives of many."

"Yes, for the prisoners must be protected."

"Bring those prisoners here, beneath your roof and leave their defense to me."

"To you, child?"

"Yes, to Marcelite and myself."

"Sue, are you mad?"

"No, Miner Turpin, she is right, for the Mascot can save them, and without bloodshed, where we might be overwhelmed, as you well know—yes, let the young ladies face these infuriated men, anxious now to wipe out the lawless element, now that Wild Bill has set the example, and in fact, they may wish to include me, for you know I am called a desperado," and the gambler spoke bitterly.

"I believe Mr. Dash is right, sir, in leaving the mob to Miss Sue," said Wild Bill.

"She can control them, I am sure," Marcelite said, and Wild Bill remarked:

"What do you say, Mr. Turpin?"

"I believe you are right."

"We will bring the prisoners here," and the three men at once started for the camp after the prisoners.

It was not long before they returned with the five deserters and Jessop, all in irons, and accompanied by two soldiers as guards.

They were taken at once into Miner Turpin's room, and as the door closed the head of the crowd came in sight and started for the soldiers' camp.

The sergeant met them, and in answer to the demand for the prisoners told them they had been taken away.

He did not mind a search of the camp, and told them that their commander, Wild Bill, could be found at the cabin of Miner Turpin upon the hill.

All the crowd had now come and to the cabin they went, the more enraged because they saw that a plan had been formed to keep them from getting possession of the prisoners.

Seated upon the piazza were the miner, his daughter, and Marcelite, Wild Bill and Dick Dash.

Up came the crowd, and their spokesman at once called out:

"Miner Turpin, where are our prisoners?"

"What prisoners, Scott?" asked the miner mildly.

"The five deserters of the army, and the last of the band of wiped-out Outlaw Owls?"

"They are Wild Bill's prisoners."

"Well, he began the good work of purifying Mascot City and we intend to keep it up, so where are they?"

"What is your wish with them?"

"To hang 'em."

"My friends, those are Government prisoners, and are in my keeping," said Wild Bill.

"Well, we know all that but we intend to hang any lawless man we can get hold of this night in the Valley, and there sits one ought to go, yes, and must," and he pointed to Dick Dash, whose smile never changed, and he sat quietly twirling the end of his mustache.

"Well, pard, as I am the keeper of those prisoners, I must ask you to let me deal with them."

"No, Wild Bill, they hangs this night."

"We don't want trouble with you or Miner Turpin, but take them we will," and a wild shout greeted the determined words of the leader.

"Do you wish trouble with me, Scott?" and Sue Turpin stepped in front of the man.

"No, Miss Sue, for you hain't in this power."

"You are mistaken, for I am in it, as you will see if you attempt to force your way into my house, and take men from beneath this roof."

"For shame, for how can I say to my friend here, the daughter of Colonel Monastery, the commandant of Fort Blank, that you are men of honor in spite of your rough ways and wild life?"

"She came here with me in perfect trust in you, on my word that you were as true as steel to your friends, and now you wish to drag six of her father's prisoners, for they were secured under Colonel Monastery's orders, out from beneath this roof and hang them."

"Why did you not find them out before, yes, hunt them down, and not wait when brave Wild Bill has done it, when they are in irons and harmless, and then seek to tear them from him because you have the numbers, the brute strength to do it?"

"Is this what I must expect from you, Scott, you and your mad followers?"

Sue had spoken spiritedly and fearlessly, and now as she ceased speaking the effect of her words was observed at once, for a deep roar went up:

"No! no! it shall not be done, Mascot!"

Scott saw that he had lost, so made the best of it by saying:

"We yield to you, Miss Sue, for you wins the game; but there sits one who is not a prisoner, whom all fear, and he shall hang for it this night," and he pointed directly at Dick Dash the Desperado Duelist.

CHAPTER L.

WILD BILL CHIPS IN.

BACKED by an enormous crowd, bent on purifying the valley camps of their bad characters, Scott had grown very bold.

He was not one who would have dared confront Dick Dash on other occasions, but now he felt he had might and right on his side.

He remembered how the Gambler Duelist had won a large sum of money from him once, and had killed his best friend, who had accused him of cheating.

Now was his time to square the two debts.

The prisoners, in the hands of a Government officer, would be safe, and in time meet punishment, but Dick Dash was at large, boldly seated before them, when all others in the camps whose lives were clouded by crime were in hiding until the cyclone of vengeance blew over.

They, the honest men, had risen in their might and the tares must be sifted from the wheat, the dirt must be divided from the gold.

Many liked Dick Dash, all feared him.

What good qualities he possessed were outweighed by the evil deeds he was known to be guilty of.

Such was the argument of Leader Scott, and his opinion was joined in with by many.

Of course Sue would not attempt to protect him from them.

"What is your wish with me, gentlemen?" asked Dick Dash in the coolest of tones, and he never changed a muscle, never rose from his seat.

"To hang you."

"That is flat-footed at least, Scott."

"I never suspected you of drinking before, but certainly you have been imbibing to get the Dutch courage you possess to-night."

"You'll feel what I've been doing, Dick Dash, when I put the rope around your neck."

Dick Dash felt his neck in the most nonchalant manner possible, and replied:

"I do not wish to have a scene in the presence of ladies, so fall back with your gang and I'll come on up to Mascot City and let you hang me, but there will be some of you, now in good health, who will not be present at the hanging."

"You'll not come, but run away."

"My worst foe never called me a coward, Scott."

"If you wish me, you must do as I say."

"You will beg the Mascot and her friend to come with you and save you."

"I never hide behind a woman, sir."

"Go, and I will follow you."

Sue Turpin had been listening to all that was said, and she had heard Marcelite's low whispered words:

"To save him may be to have him kill Wild Bill."

"What can be done, Sue?"

That question was just what she had been asking herself.

Sue admired the magnificent pluck of the man and did not wish to have him dragged away like a dog.

She had glanced toward her father, but he seemed to studiously avoid her eye, and his thoughts seemed to be the same as those of Marcelite and herself.

If saved, might not the Desperado Duelist kill Wild Bill?

Could Wild Bill again meet with his phenomenal luck, when facing such a man as was Dick Dash?

But at last she decided to make the effort to save him, and then seek Dick Dash afterward and demand, by what she had done for him, that he should not fight his duel with the scout.

She was just about to rise and once more face the crowd, to try her influence upon them, when suddenly Wild Bill rose and stepped forward.

He had been most serene through all, and his face was now unruffled, but his words came distinctly and they were heard by every man in the large crowd.

"See here, pard, you are playing a bluff game for men who hold no trumps, and I advise you to pass."

"In the first place, you wish a victim, because you are in a hanging mood, and forgetting the courtesy due ladies, wish to drag their guest off and hang him."

"He has told you what he would do, and you appear to fear him too much to let him fight for his life, a right every man has."

"If you trust him, and leave him to follow, I go with him, for I will not give up my claim until you have won it from me, and I hold the prior right to Dick Dash, as he has challenged me to fight a duel, and he has got to meet me, and your wishing to hang him is not going to deprive me of my chance to kill him, so just go your way and at the proper time you will see both of us report for duty in The Exchange, and the best man will win the game."

Wild Bill had not uttered a dozen words before he saw that he had the crowd coming his way.

When he concluded his pointed remarks there came a wild yell of applause, and Scott cried:

"We pass, Wild Bill, and the game is yours."

"We'll be there to see the duel, and if he kills you, then that will be his last act on earth."

"No, no, that shall not be, for that would be cowardly, and you are not cowards."

"That man has done you no harm, for I have heard how he has befriended many of you, has cared for your sick, has helped poor miners back to their homes, and protected many a man from death at the hands of desperadoes."

"A dangerous man he may be, one who has taken life upon life, but he is not like the despicable, cowardly creatures you should long ago have rid your camps of, not waited for strangers to do the work for you."

"Now give me your pledge, that, if in his meeting with me, he kills me, you harm him not, but allow him to go as free as before in your midst."

"The man who does not give me this pledge is a coward, and so I brand him."

There was no mistaking these ringing words,

and the penetrating eyes of Wild Bill seemed to rest upon each man in the crowd.

One instant of silence, and then there burst forth a roar like thunder, as several hundred voices cried together:

"We pledge you, Wild Bill!"

"Men, now I will show you my trust in your pledge," and with a bow to the two maidens, and a wave of the hand to Wild Bill, Dick Dash stepped to the edge of the piazza, where his horse stood, threw himself into his saddle, and rode slowly away in the very midst of the crowd.

With hearty cheers for Wild Bill, the Mascot, Marcelite and Miner Turpin the crowd swayed back from the cabin and went down the hill in the gathering twilight, while back to the ears of those on the piazza came cheers also for Dick Dash, showing how Wild Bill, and the Gambler Duelist's own trust in them, had turned the tide against him from hatred to admiration.

"But will they spare him?" asked Marcelite anxiously.

"Indeed they will," was Wild Bill's hearty rejoinder.

"And the duel?"

"Must be fought," was his stern response.

CHAPTER LI.

TWO FAIR PLOTTERS.

WHEN the crowd had gone, and even the sound of the many voices did not come back to those on the piazza of the miner's home, the prisoners were brought out of the cabin, where they had heard all that had taken place, and were led back by the two soldiers to the camp, Wild Bill telling one of the troopers to say to the sergeant that he would come after awhile and remain all night, in case a few hot-heads might get under the influence of liquor and return to make trouble.

Before they departed the prisoners thanked Sue and Wild Bill, for the stand they had taken to defend them, and they yet showed how frightened they had been by their narrow escape from being hanged by the mob.

When they had gone Miner Turpin led the way in to supper, and it was found that the negro cook and Marcelite's maid had also been terribly frightened.

"Oh, Missy Marcelite, let us get away from this terrible place, for they'll kill us all yet," said the negress, while the black cook was in an agony of fear and said:

"I tell yer, we is all jist as good as hanged, for I knows it."

But their fears were laughed down by Sue and Marcelite, and they served supper in a short while, the scout alone, however, not seeming to have lost his appetite.

After an hour spent on the piazza, Wild Bill took his leave and wended his way to camp.

Except that his wounds were sore, and he had not yet regained his former strength, he felt no great inconvenience from them, and felt that in a few days he would be all right and ready for his duel with Dick Dash.

Upon that subject the two girls had a long talk together, after the departure of Wild Bill, and the miner had gone to his cot, for he retired early.

"Sue, I have an idea that I hope we can carry out," said Marcelite, when they were alone on the piazza.

"I'll do all in my power, Marcelite."

"You are a brave, noble girl, and, but for your pluck to-day, a terrible scene of carnage would have taken place."

"You deserve a medal from Congress, really."

"Nonsense; the men are not so bad as people believe; there is an element of good among them, which will exert itself when it is needed, and their honor is appealed to."

"I know this, for I have seen some wild scenes in these mountains, Marcelite, and this is not the first tumult my influence has quelled, for I appeal to their better natures."

"When Black Jack, the Desperado, who afterward you know turned out to be my father's brother, and who kidnapped me, held sway in Mascot City, he ruled all with a rod of iron, and his name was a terror."

"Several times he incited trouble, now, I know, to have my father killed, and the men obeyed my bidding, the bidding of a little girl, and ceased their mob madness."

"No, no, I do not fear them, wild as they seem, and you saw how Wild Bill faced them, for they admire pluck above all things, and Dick Dash trusted himself right in their midst, after their threats a few moments before to hang him."

"Yes, they are a strange combination, and though I have seen strange sights in my border life, I never beheld such a scene as that one this evening."

"And may you never again."

"Amen say I with all fervency, Sue."

"But now of my idea."

"Out with it."

"It is of Dick Dash I would speak."

"Yes."

"I like that man, and I cannot but believe

that there is more good in him than he is given credit for."

"I know it."

"Now, certain notions of border honor demand that he and Wild Bill must fight a duel."

"And they will."

"Oh, yes, Wild Bill is pledged to it, and wild horses could not tear him from a purpose he was set on accomplishing where he deemed his honor and duty at stake."

"Yes, they will fight."

"And the death of one, or both, will follow."

"Surely."

"This must not be."

"It cannot be helped, Marcelite."

"I am not so sure of that."

"I am."

"The Government cannot afford to lose Wild Bill, outside of all our personal considerations, and I fear that Dick Dash is as dead a shot and dangerous a man in a duel as the scout is."

"That is my opinion."

"Now, my idea is to go and see Dick Dash."

"See him?"

"Yes, you and I."

"Oh, Marcelite."

"You pointed out his cabin to me and it stands alone, and no one would see us go there."

"He sleeps until noon, you say, so we will take a hunt in the morning, come back by his cabin about noon and see him."

"What for?"

"Well, he owes his life to-night to Wild Bill, and we must ask him to so look upon it, and refuse to fight the scout."

"He would not dare do it."

"He must."

"They would say he was a coward."

"From all accounts that accusation would not be borne out by facts, for he has a record to give it the lie, while he might very quickly, and doubtless would, put to sleep any such charges against him."

"He could say frankly that Wild Bill having befriended him in his hour of greatest need, he withdrew his challenge and refused to fight him, for you know your father said that it was the crowd in The Exchange that night that demanded that he pit himself against the scout in a duel, after three of his choicest desperadoes in the valley had been killed by Wild Bill."

"Yes, and I am with you, heartily, Marcelite, and we will go to-morrow, for delays are dangerous," and feeling that they were going to do a good work the two fair plotters retired to their room and were soon sound asleep.

CHAPTER LII.

THE PLACARD ON THE DOOR.

MINER TURPIN, Wild Bill and the two girls met at breakfast the following morning.

The valley looked beautiful in the early morning, the miners had all gone to their work and the silence was broken only by the singing of birds that always love to hover about the habitations of human beings.

Miner Turpin mounted his horse and rode away to his work of the day, and Wild Bill returned to the camp, as he said there was much to look after.

He had reported the two more seriously wounded men as doing well, while Kit Carrol and the sergeant appeared to take no notice of their wounds.

As for himself he said that the miner doctor had reported him as in fine condition, and he added:

"You know that I must soon get ready to depart, upon my return to the fort, as I will have to get back with the ransom money on time, for the release of Lieutenant Valdos."

"Do not worry about the ransom, Wild Bill, for my father has arranged that, and you are to take the amount back with you, so that you can camp your men near the rendezvous and go yourself to meet the one who has Lieutenant Valdos in charge."

"This will prevent your having to go to the fort and return," said Sue.

"But, Sue, my father must pay half of this ransom, you know," urged Marcelite.

"That your father and mine can arrange afterward, Marcelite."

"Then Lieutenant Valdos will put in his claim to pay his ransom, so I think it will be just as well, Miss Sue, for your father to pay the money now, and how it will be decided can afterward be arranged," Wild Bill remarked.

This being settled the scout returned to the military camp, while Sue and Marcelite mounted their horses, and with their rifles swung at their back, rode away to hunt for game.

They found the camps deserted, the men being away, working in their claims, and yet where they met miners they were most politely saluted, for the dwellers in Moonlight Valley took great pride in having these two beautiful, brave girls dwelling in their midst.

Mascot City was almost deserted, but those they saw there gave them a welcome as they dashed through the little village of small cabins and large saloons.

Down the valley swept the fair hunters, and after leaving all the camps behind them they

went at a slower pace and began to look for game.

It was not long before an antelope was brought down by Marcelite, and soon after Sue got a couple of wild turkeys, and they were content.

Skilled huntresses both of them they knew how to run a knife across the throat of the antelope, and to place it across the back of a horse, and this done, with the turkeys dangling on each side of Sue's pony, and the graceful form of Marcelite's game swung behind her saddle, they started back toward home, for it will be remembered that they had an important mission to perform.

It was just noon by Sue's watch, when they turned into the little glen, at the head of which the lone cabin of the Duelist Desperado was situated.

It was located beneath a group of pines, on the point of a ledge of rocks, overhung by a lofty cliff behind and upon either side, and which completely sheltered it.

The advance up the glen a man standing in the door of the cabin could defend against a score.

A spring was at one side of the cabin, a rustic arbor, with table and settee, and a shed for a couple of horses in the rear.

The cabin was stoutly built, with one large front room across its length, and two smaller ones in the rear, one used as a sleeping-room, the other as a kitchen and the larger as a sitting-room, and the latter was carpeted with the skins of bear, fox, wolves, mountain lion and sheep, the walls hung with pencil sketches of scenes in the valley, trophies of the chase and curios of all kinds, in which there was a perfect arsenal of weapons.

As the two girls rode up to the cabin they saw that the door was ajar, and upon it was a piece of white paper posted.

"He must be at home, for his door is open," said Marcelite.

"What does that placard mean there?" Sue asked.

Riding up near to the door Sue called out:

"Ho, Dick Dash, are you there?"

There was no answer and Sue called again.

Still no reply.

Then they rode close up to the door, and Sue read aloud what was written on the piece of paper.

It was a sheet of letter paper, pasted firmly upon the door and read as follows:

"TAKE NOTICE!!

"TO ALL WHOM IT MAY CONCERN!

"I, Dick Dash, known as the Desperado Duelist of Moonlight Valley Camps, do hereby take leave of my house and the miners of Mascot City forever.

"My purpose in thus leaving is to avoid a duel with Wild Bill, the Government Scout, whom I had challenged to meet me in a personal encounter at The Exchange, ten days after his duels with Mephisto Mike and Red Hand Romeo, whom he killed.

"To-night, Wild Bill dared face half the miners in this valley to protect my life, and but for his bold act, I would now be hanging from the end of a rope.

"Therefore I refuse to meet him as agreed, and, as the term of coward would be thrown in my face by many, I take my leave of my house, that I may not be forced to kill more men than those already slain by me, and whom I have had more of a purpose in slaying than has appeared upon the surface, for I have been on a trail of revenge.

"As I have publicly asserted that the man who conquered me was my heir, I now leave my cabin and its possessions to

"J. B. HICKOK—WILD BILL,

"THE GOVERNMENT SCOUT,

to have and hold as his own property, and I appoint as executor

"MINER HUGH TURPIN

to see that my wishes are carried out in full.

"DICK DASH,

"The Gambler and Desperado Duelist."

When she had read the placard over plainly and distinctly, Sue turned and gazed at Marcelite.

Both were intensely amazed, and certainly well-pleased, for they revealed it by their faces:

"Well, Sue, what do you think of that?"

"We have been anticipated."

"Yes, he has proven himself a brave man with a good heart after all."

"He certainly has; but now to take the news to father and to Wild Bill, for they will be at the cabin for dinner by the time we get there," and they started off at a canter for home.

CHAPTER LIII.

WILD BILL THE DUelist.

Wild Bill's face, usually so stern and calm, revealed its surprise in every feature, when he learned from the two girls that Dick Dash had gone and left him his heir.

The placard had been left on the door, and as soon as dinner was over it was decided that the four should return to the cabin along with several others whom Miner Turpin would pick up in Mascot City.

"I cannot understand it," said Wild Bill repeating the remark several times.

"You do not attribute it to cowardice do you?" asked Marcelite.

"Cowardice, Miss Marcelite?"

"Why that man has not an atom of it in his make-up."

"I do not believe he ever knew what it was to feel a pang of fear."

"No, no, he went as he said, to avoid a difficulty with one who he felt served him last night."

"I like the man, and did when I first saw him, and let me tell you now, what I have kept secret before, that when Red Hand Romeo told him to give the word to fire in such a way that it would be an advantage to him, he refused, and more, whispered to me as he passed:

"Look out for a shot before the word."

"That put me on my guard and perhaps saved my life."

"That proves him to be at heart a good man, and possessed of honor," said Miner Turpin.

"And he intimates in the placard that he was on a track of revenge here in Mascot City," said Marcelite.

"Yes, have you noticed any reason for so believing, miner?" asked Wild Bill.

"Now it comes up, it occurs to me that his duels have been fought with striking regularity, and in each case with a man whom he has often played cards with, and almost invariably accused of cheating."

"Then he has been picking his men."

"It would seem so, Bill."

"I never heard that he was ever accused of cheating at cards, father."

"Accused, oh, yes, but it was never proven on him, and the accuser answered the accusation with his life."

"Yes, I guess after all the half-dozen years that he has passed here, he has been upon a trail of revenge, now I review the facts," the miner said.

"He is yet a very young man, sir, scarcely over twenty-eight or thirty."

"Yes, thirty is his age, for he once told me so, Miss Marcelite, but when his mustache is shaved off, for sometimes he does cut it off, he looks much younger than that, with his long hair, and his face is almost womanly then."

"He certainly is a most mysterious and remarkable man; but now let us be off for his cabin, ere some straggler gets in there and robs it, or tears down the placard."

In ten minutes they had mounted their horses and were riding in the direction of the Duelist's cabin.

On the way through Mascot City Mr. Turpin halted and asked several of the most prominent miners to accompany them, and when they halted before Dick Dash's deserted home there were nine in the party.

The door still stood ajar, as it had been left, the placard was there, and no one else had visited the place since the girls had left it.

On the way Miner Turpin had explained to those who had joined him, that the young ladies had gone there to try and prevent the gambler from fighting the duel with Wild Bill, and reading the placard had hastened home and informed him of their discovery.

"Dick Dash came to my store last night, when he came back with the crowd, and settled his account in full," said the storekeeper, "for he was always a square man," said the keeper of the Mascot City store.

"Yes, and he settled his account at the tavern, treated the whole crowd to drinks and cigars, and gave a few hundreds to Samaritan Sam to look after the poor men and the sick ones in the valley," said the landlord of the tavern and The Exchange.

"I remember, too, he bought quite a bill of goods last night, and a pack-saddle," said the storekeeper.

"Yes, and led away with him the three horses I have been keeping at the coach stables for him, and he owns five of the finest animals I ever set eyes on," said the landlord of The Exchange, who was also tavernkeeper, stage-coach agent and postmaster as well.

"Well, he has surely gone," remarked Miner Turpin, when he read the placard.

"He has indeed gone, and you are his heir, Wild Bill," the landlord said.

"There is no doubt of that fact," remarked the storekeeper, "for his will says so, and I recognize and will swear to it, that it is the writing and signature of Dick Dash."

"What he says goes," remarked others, while Wild Bill seemed embarrassed at the situation he found himself in, as the heir of the Duelist Desperado.

"Yes, and as the executor named, I will see that his wishes are carried out."

"Now let us see just what the cabin contains," and they all dismounted, at the suggestion of Miner Turpin, and entered the home of the Border Duelist.

CHAPTER LIV.

INVENTORY.

"HERE are three horses, showing that he took two with him," called out one of the men from the stable in the rear, and he led the animals around in front of the cabin.

They were three beautiful horses, and selecting the larger one Wild Bill said:

"I shall prize this animal as having belonged to my foe-friend Dick Dash.

"The other two, Miss Marcelite, you and Miss Sue are to have."

In vain were the protestations, for the scout was firm, and both the girls yielded, delighted with their beautiful presents, and which had the record they did of having belonged to Dick Dash.

Entering the cabin where not a soul in the valley had ever been known to have been invited, all were struck with the air of refinement that rested upon all.

There was a table in the center, made of a patchwork spread of the skins of wild animals, fringed with birds' feathers.

A student's lamp was on the table, and writing materials, the inkstand being a curled horn of the mountain sheep, set on a rock filled with gold grains.

There was a shelf of books on one side, a guitar and flute, weapons of various kinds, Indian curios, skins, and a lot of other things prized most highly by bordermen.

A box, upon being opened, revealed quite a treasure in bits of gold, several thousand dollars' worth, with a bag which had a tag on it that read:

"Taken from the body of Red Hand Romeo, and left me by him."

In one of the rear rooms was a rustic cot made of cedar, with sheets and blankets, and on the wall a lot of clothes too bulky to be carried with him.

There were pen and pencil sketches upon the walls also, as in the larger room, and they were artistic in execution, bearing the letters:

"D. D."

as the artist.

The third room was a kitchen, with cooking utensils, but as the Gambler Duelist took his meals at the tavern in Mascot City, the place was used more as a lumber room.

"Well, Wild Bill, here is your property, and this map on the wall shows your claim, as staked out, and there was a find here once, but never worked," said Miner Turpin.

"No, it was of too little value," remarked the storekeeper.

"Well, Mr. Turpin, as the heir, and you being the executor, please sit down and write that I leave the claim, cabin, and what it contains, excepting the inkstand and a few minor things, with the gold in the box, left by Red Hand Romeo, and all else, to the care of three of the citizens in Mascot City, to be disposed of for the benefit of the sick and needy who are now in the valley.

"The horses are already disposed of, and I believe the young ladies wish the sketches, while the inkstand I intend as a present to Colonel Monastery."

There was surprise at this decision of the scout to give his inheritance away, but he meant what he said and he was honored the more for it, for there were sick and needy in the camps to whom the gift would come as a great boon.

Miner Turpin therefore drew up the paper, and in it the storekeeper, blacksmith and landlord of The Exchange were named as the men to dispose of the claim and distribute the result of the sale where it would do the most good.

The document was duly signed by Wild Bill as heir and Miner Turpin as executor, while the witnesses were Marcelite, Sue and the others present.

The things received were then packed upon one of the horses, and the valuables turned over to the storekeeper as treasurer, after which the door was locked and the party started upon their return.

The news went like wildfire through Mascot City, that Dick Dash had gone away, and at first the rumors were that he had been driven off by Wild Bill, and again that he had fled from cowardice.

This rumor was contradicted, yet many asserted their belief in it, until learning from Kit Carrol how the talk went up in Mascot City, Wild Bill wended his way up to The Exchange that night after he left the miner's cabin.

His entrance of the large saloon was the signal for a hush to fall upon all, and then followed a loud cheer of greeting.

The scout had not yet gotten his color back, and his face was pale, but calm, and walking to a position near the bar he faced the crowd as though he had something to say.

"Pards, you have all heard the truth of Dick Dash's leaving this valley, and in spite of it, and knowing that he left because he did not wish to fire upon one who had befriended him, there are some I have heard, who persist in calling him a coward, now that he is not here to silence your tongues.

"To those, let me say that I consider him as

brave a man as I ever met, and the one whom I hear apply the epithet of coward to him, I shall hold responsible the same as though it was hurled in my own teeth.

"There has been bloodshed enough in this valley, so, pards, I hope there will be no one to urge on more trouble."

A cheer greeted the manly words of the scout, and those present who had been loud-mouthed in denouncing the scout now hung their heads in silence, not daring to take up the gauntlet so daringly thrown down to them.

"Now, pards, as I must soon leave your beautiful valley, let me ask you all to join me in a parting glass," and the crowd accepted the invitation as one man, and Wild Bill's health was drank with a will, for his generous donation to the sick and needy in the valley was appreciated by all but a few soreheads, but they wisely refrained from voicing their opinions, which were formed on a basis of prejudice against any man who was deservedly a hero.

CHAPTER LV.

WILD BILL RECEIVES A VISIT.

It was the third day after the departure of Dick Dash, that Wild Bill was seated in camp, when a trooper came up with a visitor who wished to see him.

The man was an odd-looking specimen of humanity, in appearance not unlike the pictures one sees of Santa Claus.

He had a full beard that reached to his belt, and would have been white only that it was of a yellowish hue that soap and hot water might have caused to depart from it.

His hair was long, iron gray, and thick, and his stature tall and powerful.

From head to foot he was clad in buckskin, Indian tanned, for he wore moccasins, leggings, a hunting shirt and cap, the latter having a red fox's tail hanging from it down his back.

He had a belt of arms, two revolvers and a knife, a breech-loading army rifle, and a bow and quiver of arrows.

At his back was a buckskin knapsack, home-made, with a blanket rolled up tightly on the top, another at the bottom, and a canvas hammock and large rubber blanket strapped between.

To the knapsack hung a coffee-pot, tin-cup, frying-pan, and canteen.

In spite of his apparent age, he stood as upright as a soldier, and seemed not to mind the weight he carried.

He gazed at Wild Bill in a curious way, like one who was glad to meet him, and said with a pronounced border dialect:

"So you be Wild Bill, eh?"

"Yes, pard, so they call me."

"Yer look it, for you hain't no ordinary man."

"Thanks, pard, sit down."

"I'm gom' ter."

"Yas, I've heered o' yer ag'in and ag'in, and the Injuns say yer is jist p'izen ter them, bad medicine, while road-agents and sich hain't happy when you is around."

"I'm right down glad ter meet yer, Wild Bill, put it thar," and he held out his hand, which the scout grasped, while he answered:

"The pleasure is mutual, pard, but I have not yet gotten hold of your name."

"That's so."

"Forgot ter interdoose myself; but it's never too late ter do good."

"I hain't ashamed o' my name, as many men out here be, and for reasons."

"It be Sandy Craft, or rightly, Sanderson Craft, called Sandy for short, and forty year ago hailin' from ther mountains of North Carolina, now a citizen o' ther Plains o' ther Wild West."

"Ther Injuns call me the Grizzly Bear Chief, Wolf Man and sich, while ther few pale-faces as knows me calls me ther Hermit Trapper, seein' as I traps fer a livin'."

"Though I hain't the friend o' ther Injuns, they don't hunt me, for reasons that ther chiefs and me is pards from 'wayback."

"I has a leetle shanty up in the mount'ins, an' thar I lives and hunts pelts, coming twice a year ter tradin' points ter sell 'em, and buy grub, sometimes one place, sometimes another."

"I comed here to-day with a couple o' horses loaded with pelts, and I has bought a lot o' grub ter tote back."

"I come ter this sunset country long ago, 'cause I didn't want ter be crowded with comp'ny, and I likes it."

"Now yer has my hist'ry so yer c'd write my obituary if I dropped dead."

"I heerd ther gold-diggers talkin' of you, and as I were told yer was here, I come ter see yer, and I'm proud ter meet yer, Wild Bill."

The words and manner of the old trapper aroused Wild Bill.

He saw that he was a character in his way, and set him down as an honest man.

He had often heard that there was an old trapper in the mountains, who was now and then seen by scouts, and who was called the Hermit Hunter, but he had never before met him.

Never had he heard anything against him, though it was wondered how he dared trap in the Indian country as he did.

It was said that he had a lone camp, and red-skins had stated that he had as pets grizzly bears, mountain lions, wolves, wildcats and snakes, with an eagle, raven and owls.

This alone made him dreaded by the Indians, who regarded him as possessed of supernatural powers.

The scout was glad, therefore, to meet the strange man, and he said:

"Well, pard, I am really glad to meet you, and if you go my way, on the trail back, I shall be glad of your company, for I leave here in a few days now."

"No, thankee, I pulls out to-day, but I wants a leetle talk with yer first."

"Fire away, old man."

"Yes, sir, if I does live kinder friendly with ther Injuns, I hain't ter be regarded as no renegade ter my own people."

"I should hope not."

"No, I hain't thet kind o' a devil, only I left home long ago a poor man."

"Fact was I got eddicated, though yer wouldn't think it now, and I expected ter marry a gal I loved more than my soul."

"She were as pretty as a pink, graceful as a bird, pure as a lily and sweet as a rose."

"But while I were away a saddier in Mexico, for I were a capt'in under General Taylor, a man I thought my friend, who slept under the same blanket with me, and whom I risked my life ter take off ther field when he was wounded, went back home and lied about me."

"He told how I had secretly married a Mexican gal, and that pretty nigh broke my leetle one's heart."

"She was urged by her parents not to think of me no more, for I was poor, there being a big mortgage on my mother's home, and he being rich, my false friend, she was forced ter marry him."

"I come back when the war was over ter find my mother dead."

He paused a moment and then, dropping the border dialect and speaking with deep emotions, he continued:

"I was told that news had come that I had married a Mexican girl and had been killed soon after."

"It broke my mother's heart and she died some months before my return."

"Nor was this all, for I found my false friend the husband of the girl who had been my idol, and more, he had made her his slave, most cruelly treating her."

"I could not stand that, and so I made him meet me in a duel."

"We fought with swords and I ran him through the heart."

"Leaving my mortgaged home in the hands of an attorney I left there and became a wanderer, to at last seek an abiding place here."

"My pelts have brought money enough in three years to pay off the mortgage, the town has built out to my home and to-day I am a rich man, and yet I still linger here as you see."

"Pard, there is that in your face that made me tell the story I have breathed to no one else—forgive me," and the man's face once more assumed its serenity, broken by the recital of his wronged life.

CHAPTER LVI.

THE TRAPPER'S SECRET.

WILD BILL had become much impressed with his visitor.

Now he looked at him he saw that he was not as old looking as he had first appeared, and he felt that sorrow and bitterness had turned him prematurely gray, though he yet must be on the verge of fifty years of age.

He certainly was no ordinary man, and yet he had been content to lead the life of a hermit for long years, for he must have been little more than of age when he came out upon the plains.

A rich man, by his own confession, he yet remained in the wild West living a lone and dangerous life with all its hardships and suffering.

The more he saw of him, the more he admired him, and when he had heard his strange, romantic story of wrong, Wild Bill held forth his hand and said warmly:

"I am glad to claim you for a pard, Mr. Craft, and I feel that we will be good friends."

"Don't see why not, for we is both honest men in our way," was the answer, and he dropped back into his border way of speaking.

"Yer see, I've got something more ter tell yer, and it's not about myself."

"Well, I shall be glad to hear it if it is about yourself, pard."

"I said I was friendly with the Injuns?"

"Yes."

"Yer see, I once come across two Injun chiefs fighting in the timber."

"One were a Pawnee, t'other a young Sioux."

"The latter was wounded, but was givin' ther other a tough fight of it, though he was bleedin' free."

"Well," says I to myself, "that hain't jist square so I'll take up fer ther under dog in ther fight."

"I c'd hev' kilt 'em both, fer they was too tuck up with ther own work ter see me; but I concluded as ther leetle feller was gittin' worsted and wounded too, I'd chip in and help him out."

"I jist stepped up then quick and give the big Pawnee chief a tumble, and it seems I were a leetle too rough, fer he fell so hard he hit his head ag'in a rock and lay thar."

"T'other was about used up, and yet showed fight, fer he supposed his tarn would come next; but I told him I wasn't going to hurt him, and so stopped the bleeding from the arrow wound in his side and fixed it up for him."

"Well, he was that grateful durned ef I didn't see tears in his eyes, and Indians hain't given ter ther crybaby act to no alarmin' extent, as far as I has been a judge o' ther varmint."

"They is humans, like us, and their Parnin' is ter kill them as persecutes 'em, and they does it, and pale-faces hain't been their bosom friends."

"Well, arter I hed camped thar and made my Sioux chief comfortable, I takes a look at Pawnee."

"Then I sees that he was dead, that ther rock had caved in his knowledge-box."

"I jist yanked off his scalplock and give it to ther young chief, with my compliments, and he was pleased all over."

"I gave him also ther weepins of his foe, and over in the timber was his pony, as fine a spotted beast as I ever seen, and I let ther Sioux have him also."

"Seein' that ther chief were a leetle more hurt than I thought, I helped him on his pony, which was also near, and having buried the Pawnee, took him to my camp."

"I happens ter have a idee for pets, and bein' as I has caught, when babies, a couple o' grizzly bears, ditto wolves, ditto mountain lions and wild-cats, with a eagle or two, hawk and owls, my lay-out looks like a menagerie, and Injuns don't banker arter bein' round thar."

"Ther Sioux kinder thought I were a evil spirit, or bad medicine, and he were scared at inter fits."

"But I treated him prime for several days and then tuk him to his village, and you bet that made ther whole outfit my friends."

"It give me ther right ter go unmolested, and now and then I'd get a visit from ther chief, for he is ther High Muck-y-muck o' ther village now, and calls me brother, which I suppose I is, seein' as how Adam was granddad o' us all."

"Waal, I has gone to ther village once in a great while, and I jist wants ter tell yer what I discovered thar when I went a month ago, and it's been a-frettin' me a heap."

"What was it, pard?"

"It were that they has a white captive there."

"Indeed!"

"They has."

"When was this?"

"Some month or more ago."

"Then it was not the one I at first thought."

"Do you know of any captive the Indians have?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"An army officer, whom I hope to secure the release of on my way back."

"I don't know of him."

"Do you know that the tribe has a renegade white chief?"

"No, for Red Heart, ther Injun who is my friend, is chief."

"You refer to the tribe of Sioux that lie north of Fort Blank?"

"Yes."

"What white captives do you know that they have with them?"

"Only one, a young girl."

"A young girl?" asked Wild Bill in surprise.

"Yes, and one that made my heart weep to see, for she is young and beautiful."

"I only saw her for a minute, and Red Heart the chief told me it was his daughter, but he lies."

"That is my secret, pard, and I wants you to rescue that poor leetle gal."

"I am with you, old man," was the scout's determined response.

CHAPTER LVIII.

WILD BILL'S RESOLVE.

For a long time Wild Bill talked with the old trapper, and when at last the latter took his leave they appeared to have become the very best of friends.

The trapper went away with a very substantial present from the scout in the shape of a repeating-rifle, and pair of the latest patented revolvers, with ample ammunition for them, weapons which he had taken from the cabin of Dick Dash.

An hour after the scout saw him ride along the trail, going north toward Zigzag Canyon, riding a handy little pony, and with another one trailing behind him, loaded down with a pack-saddle.

What surprised Wild Bill most was the fact that a huge gray wolf trotted behind the pack-horse, while a large panther led the way along the trail, a few paces in front of the trapper's horse.

Seated upon the top of the pack, and apparently enjoying its ride was a raven, and the strange sight caused the soldiers to stand and gaze in wonder at the odd company of the man.

Seeing Wild Bill he held up his rifle and patted it affectionately while he called out:

"I've got it, and I'm proud to own it."

"See you again some time, Pard Bill—maybe."

With this he passed on out of sight along the trail, while Wild Bill walked up to Miner Turpin's cabin.

Sue and Marcelite were seated in their favorite spot, the piazza, and they greeted him pleasantly.

"Did you see it?" they asked in a breath.

"The procession?"

"Yes, man, horse, wolf, panther, crow—oh! what a sight it was, and Sue tells me she has seen the outfit before."

"Yes indeed, several times."

"Once he came down here I remember with a grizzly bear, a wild-cat as rear guard and a tremendous rattlesnake coiled up upon the pack."

"He stamped the whole of Mascot City, and McCord the storekeeper told him to help himself to all he saw and never mind paying for it."

"He camped in what the miners delight in calling the Boulevard, and not a man was seen in Mascot City's streets that night."

"When he got his provisions and left the next morning the sigh of relief that came down the valley sounded like a storm rising."

"He has been here often since, I am told, so the miners all know him now, though they do not get intimate with him or his pets."

"He was over to the camp I noticed, Wild Bill, so that the soldiers had a seance with him, I suppose."

Both the scout and Marcelite laughed heartily at Sue's description of the old trapper's visit to Mascot City with his pets, and then Wild Bill answered:

"Yes, I had a long talk with him and I assure you I like him immensely."

"He is man whose life has known sorrows, and he has hidden here from his fellow-men, in these wilds."

"What I tell you both is in confidence of course; but that which he told me this morning will cause me to start on the back trail to-morrow."

"So soon?"

"Yes, Miss Sue."

"Nothing of a serious nature to cause it, I hope?"

"I'll tell you, Miss Marcelite, just what it is, though of course you must keep the secret."

Both gave their pledge to do so, and Wild Bill went on to say:

"The old man is no renegade, but has the run of the Indian country unmolested."

"He can even visit the Indian villages, and, a month ago when there, at the village of Red Heart—"

"The head chief of the band that holds Mr. Valdos a prisoner," said Marcelite.

"Yes, Miss Marcelite, the very band."

"The old man saw there a white captive."

"Not Lieutenant Valdos?"

"That is what first struck me; but it was some time before the lieutenant's capture."

"Who was the unfortunate captive then, or might it not have been the renegade white chief who demanded the money for the lieutenant's ransom?"

"That also suggested itself to me, but the trapper told me that there was no renegade white chief in the band."

"He must be mistaken."

"He says that he is not, that he knows every chief and all are red-skins of full blood, and I have faith in him."

"Then who is this captive?"

"A young and beautiful girl, he says, whom Red Heart claims as his daughter."

"Ah?"

"But the trapper asserts that she is a blonde, and has not a drop of Indian blood in her veins."

"Has she been there long?"

"No, he thinks not over a year."

"Can she not be rescued?"

"That is just why I start on the trail to-morrow, for the sergeant can follow by slow marches, several days after."

"Do you go alone?"

"Yes, I shall go up into the Indian country, meet the old trapper, and endeavor to rescue the girl captive, at the same time trying to see if we cannot arrange for the escape of Lieutenant Valdos also."

"Wild Bill, you trust too much to your lucky star," said Marcelite shaking her head ominously.

CHAPTER LVIII.

THE SCOUT'S LONE TRAIL.

THAT night many efforts were made to have Wild Bill give up his intended trip into the Indian country, to alone attempt the rescue of the white captive there, but in vain.

He would stick to his resolve against all that Miner Turpin and the two young girls could say.

"You see I do not go alone," he argued.

"I will meet the old trapper."

"And you only have his word for it that he is honest, and he may be himself the renegade white chief," said Sue.

"No, Miss Sue, I have studied too many faces to be far wrong in noting his, and I'll vouch for it that he is all that he says he is."

"And yet you risk your life, torture and all, for the sake of an unknown white captive?"

"No, Miner Turpin, I am going as much on Lieutenant Valdos's account as upon hers."

"There is no reason, if the sum can be saved, why the ransom should be paid, and who is this white chief who demands it, I wish to know?"

"If I can, with the aid of the trapper, rescue the young girl, I can aid the escape of Lieutenant Valdos."

"I hope that you may, Wild Bill, but as I said, you depend too much upon your phenomenal luck to get out of deadly scrapes," Marcelite remarked.

The scout laughed, and the miner said:

"So you start to-morrow?"

"Yes, sir."

"Are you well enough?"

"I am perfectly well, sir, for my wounds give me not the slightest trouble now."

"Where do you go?"

"To a rendezvous appointed with the trapper."

"And then?"

"To the Indian village of Red Heart, I suppose."

"The sergeant goes when?"

"He will start in four days, for the wounded men can travel by that time without injury, and they can make slow marches."

"Then I am to give this ransom money to the sergeant?"

"Yes, sir, in case I do not get the lieutenant off, it will be well to have it."

"Where will the sergeant meet you?"

"At the ridge, where the young ladies camped the first night coming out."

"Kit Carrol remains with the command?"

"Yes, sir."

"The sergeant is to wait at the place where he is to meet you how long?"

"Until the third day after the thirty days named as the time are up."

"Well, Wild Bill, I have been thus particular for a reason."

"Yes, sir."

"I find that I can get away from here within a week, or ten days at the furthest, for McCord, the storekeeper, and the others who have the Dick Dash fund in hand, will complete what business I have to leave unfinished."

"Now I am anxious to get these young ladies back to the shelter of the fort once more, and soon after start East with my daughter, so I am glad to find out that I will be able to shorten my stay here in the mines by a couple of months."

"I am certainly glad to hear this, sir."

"In going from here, as I will for good, I will have to carry along a considerable sum, in money and in uncoined gold, so I do not wish any one to know of my intention, save those named, until the day of my departure, for in spite of the grand work you have done, there are still bad men in the mines who might be tempted to kill and rob where so much money was at stake."

"You are right, sir."

"I therefore wish to ask you if you will give the sergeant permission to remain and serve as an escort?"

"Nothing would give me more pleasure than to do so, sir, and I am glad that you can go along back with the troops."

"With the sergeant, corporal and their sixteen men, Kit Carrol and myself, it gives us twenty fighting men."

"Yes, sir."

"Then there are the two horse-wranglers, and the six prisoners, who can be made to fight upon a pinch."

"Release Jessop, sir, the moment you leave camp, for he will be true as steel."

"They make eight more, and with the girls, the cook and Marcelite's maid, we count up in all thirty-two souls, not an unformidable-looking cavalcade by any means, and besides we will have a score extra and pack-animals, so it would take a large force of Indians to attack us, and no road-agents would consider it for a minute, so the chances are that we would go through with flying colors."

"There is no doubt of it, sir, and, as I said, I am glad you are going for your own, and the sake of the young ladies."

"Kit knows the trails well, and you can await for me at the rendezvous named, for three days at least."

"If I arrive there first, I will wait for you."

"Now, sir, we understand each other, and, as I make an early start, I will say good-night."

All hated to see the scout go, but they shook hands in farewell, and he went over to his camp, gave the sergeant instructions about waiting for Miner Turpin, and before dawn, mounted upon his own horse, and with the animal of Dick Dash carrying his pack, was off on his lone trail.

CHAPTER LIX.

THE MEETING.

WILD BILL felt proud of his two splendid horses, for he considered that his own horse had found an equal in the animal left him by Dick Dash.

The latter was well trained and trotted along behind him without being led.

The scout was well prepared for camping, and his provision supply was ample, with plenty of ammunition as well.

He was glad to be able to start upon so grand a mission as the rescue of a fair captive from the Indians, and also an attempt to aid the escape of Lieutenant Valdos from his foes.

He did not hurry his horses, allowing them to keep along at their own pace, a dog trot that would carry them over many a mile in a day.

He camped an hour at noon and was quietly eating his dinner when there came a sharp report, a whirring sound, and the scout fell over backward from his saddle upon which he had been seated.

As he lay there motionless two men bounded over a rock a hundred yards away.

They were white men, in miner's garb and each held a rifle in his hand as they ran.

"He's human after all, pard, as I know'd he were," cried one as he came along.

"Yas, yer bullet did it, Jake, and I has one fer him ef he hain't quite dead," said the other, and they were now within a few feet of their victim.

"And I have a bullet for each of you."

The words came with startling distinctness, and they were followed by two shots in rapid succession.

Both men went down upon their faces, and rising from the ground Wild Bill put his hand up and there was a spot of blood upon it.

"The bullet just nipped my ear—a close call."

"Now to get acquainted."

He walked toward the two men, turned them over and saw his fatal brand, a bullet hole between the eyes of each one.

"Yes, I recognize them both."

"They were pards of Red Hand Romeo, and now they have started on his trail."

"They evidently knew in some way that I was to take the trail alone, so started out ahead of me."

"I must bury them," and with this he took a hatchet from his pack, marked out a grave and began to dig where the earth was soft, and right by the side of the trail.

It was a couple of hours' work, but when finished he went over to the rock where the assassins had been in ambush and found their horses not far distant.

He took a blanket from each, and after looking through the pockets of the dead men, with little results as to finding anything of value, he rolled them up and placed them in the grave.

Then he filled it up, rolled some heavy stones on top of it, to protect the bodies from coyotes, and then wrote with a pencil on a slip of paper:

"Pards of Red Hand Romeo."

"With the compliments of"

"WILD BILL."

This he stuck in a split in a stick and put it on the grave, after which he started once more upon his way, riding the outlaws' horses and sparing his own.

The two horses he had thus fallen heir to, were really good animals, as were also their trappings while the rifle and other weapons of the men were of the best.

It was sunset when he went into camp, and he selected a spot where no assassin could hold the advantage over him, though he did not look for further trouble from that source.

The night passed without adventure, and at sunrise he was again on his way, riding one of the outlaws' horses and with the pack strapped upon the other.

It was an hour before sunset, having left the trail at noon, that he came to a halt in a wild and picturesque spot, a stream flowing through a beautiful glen, and with lofty cliffs sheltering it.

"Yes, this is the spot, but I do not see any sign of the trapper yet," muttered Wild Bill.

But he had hardly uttered the words when he saw a horseman come into sight up the glen.

"It is the trapper and he is prompt," said the scout and he rode toward him.

The hunter greeted him with a shout of welcome, and as he drew near called out:

"I seen so many hosses, I jist laid low, until I see there was only one man with 'em."

"They is good critters, all of 'em; but I is glad ter see yer, pard."

"And I to meet you again, Pard Sandy."

"Yes, two of these horses were a present to me on the trail, from two desperadoes who ambushed me—see, their bullet just nipped my ear."

"I played possum and when they came for my scalp, hit back."

"Killed 'em, of course."

"Yes, I buried them on the trail: but here I am, ready for business."

"And business it will be; but now come on with me to my lay-out, pard, and yer will be ther only white man I ever invited thar," and the hunter led the way up the glen.

CHAPTER LX.

THE HERMIT'S HOME.

WILD BILL followed along after the Hunter Hermit in silence, for the trail was not an easy one and neither spoke for a long while.

A ride of a dozen miles carried them further into the mountains, and at last the trail led up a canyon with high bluffs on either side, which not even a wild-cat could scale.

There was a stream flowing down the canyon, and a mile from its entrance it narrowed until it was not a hundred yards in width.

Here a fence of trees had been felled across, with rude bars to let down on one side.

Beyond the canyon widened, but still the same high, precipitous bluffs continued.

A lake several acres in size was in the canyon, which was carpeted with a bed of the best of grass.

In the canyon was feeding the other horse of the Hermit, and which the scout remembered to have seen with him in Moonlight Valley.

At the further end of the canyon was a log hut, stoutly built and as strong as a stockade fort.

Riding up to the little cabin the hunter said:

"Tis is my home, Wild Bill, and you are welcome—see, my pets wish to get acquainted with you."

He had dropped his border way of speaking again, and addressed the scout in a courtly, hospitable way.

The roof of the cabin was built of hewn logs, and extended over so as to form a shelter, like a porch in front.

There was a door and two windows in front, and the view was a fine one, while the stream rippled over a pebbly bed not ten feet away.

A deer hung up by the side of the cabin, a turkey and a wild goose also, and a fire burning against a rock where there was a bench, with cooking utensils near, gave promise of a good supper.

Within the cabin was a long table and bench, a cot made of canes, and one that had evidently just been manufactured for the scout to sleep on.

But it was the "pets that wanted to get acquainted with him," that most impressed the scout.

They were not the kind of "pets" that he just longed for, but he was anxious to appear friendly if they were.

There were two large grizzly bears, several mountain lions, a couple of wild-cats, half a dozen wolves, a large rattlesnake lying near the door, and ravens, eagles and owls.

Wild Bill's iron nerve gave several twitches as he gazed at the pets, and he said:

"Pard Sandy, do you enjoy such company to any great extent?"

"Well, yes."

"Those grizzlies, and in fact all of my pets, never knew what it was to be wild, nor did the generations before them for several removes back."

"I do not allow them to increase on me, but keep them in limited numbers, and always let them know that I am master."

"I began with them, in the first place, as cubs, and young birds, and make them look to me for food, and you would be surprised to know that not one of them will go beyond the bars of the canyon unless with me."

"And they do not eat your horses up?"

"Not they, for see they have not dared touch that game that I hung there before going away."

"No, I could bring a lamb into the canyon and they would not disturb it."

"Just see how friendly they are with you."

"Yes, I both see and feel; but that horrid snake there?"

"He is harmless, for I pulled his fangs when he was only a youngster."

"I am glad to know that; but I suppose none of them bunk in the cabin with you?"

"Oh, no, they have their quarters in the rear in bad and cold weather."

"When I go away I kill game for them and leave it around, and it lasts them for the four days I am generally gone after supplies, for at other times I am never away longer than a day, and a night perhaps."

"I have plenty of game near, the lake and streams swarm with fish and wild fowls, and I trap all around and pelts are in abundance."

"Yet you cannot live this way much longer."

"My dear friend, I do not expect to do so."

"Of late there has been creeping over me a

feeling to go back to the old home, to visit the scenes of my happy boyhood, to stand once again by the graves of my kindred, my loved mother and father."

"Time has softened, if it has not healed the wound in my heart of a lost love, and, as in those days dueling was not a crime in North Carolina, I need have no fear of returning there from any dread of prosecution."

"So I long to go, for do you know I have picked up considerable gold in these mountains and have sent it East, I have a good bank account from pelts alone, and my farm, as I told you, is now on the edge of a flourishing city and every letter I receive, my attorney tells me of large sums offered for my land if cut up into lots."

"I believe I can go back and pass my days quietly and in the end be laid to rest by the side of those of my blood, while I can, with my money, do much good in the world."

"Yes, pard, I long to go, and I tell you now we must rescue that young girl, and the officer you spoke of as being also a captive there among the Indians, and I believe we can do it, for I have a plot to suggest to you."

"I am with you heart and hand, Pard Sandy, so say the word when we go?"

"To-morrow we will start, for we can talk it all over to-night."

"How far is the village from here?"

"About twenty-five miles, and I know the trail well."

"What does it number?"

"Say two thousand for Red Heart's village, with more in the other camps, but those we will have nothing to do with, and they are miles to the north of his."

CHAPTER LXI.

A BOLD PLOT.

THE Hermit seemed anxious to please his guest, and got up for him the best supper his larder afforded, and that meant a great deal, he having just returned from Mascot City with his supplies.

The animals sat about, looking on, patiently awaiting the bones and scraps that would come to them, while the owl, night having come on, set up his doleful hoot at intervals of every ten minutes as though he was set there especially to mark off the passage of time.

"That infernal bird will give me indigestion and the nightmare will follow."

"I never heard such a melancholy hoot," said Wild Bill, laughing.

"Shut up, Night Eyes," cried the Hermit and the owl at once subsided, the raven giving a croak of satisfaction.

Anxious to curry favor with the beasts, Wild Bill gave them a bone and pieces of meat, which they appeared to appreciate greatly from his hands.

"I am not a toady, pard, but in this case I make an exception, for I do wish to stand well with your family," said the scout.

Supper being over and the animals fed, the two men lighted their pipes and sat down for a long chat together.

The sun had set, the moon was rising over the cliffs to take its place, the stream flowed along with musical murmur, and the valley rested in serene beauty under the silvery rays falling upon it.

All nature seemed at rest, and the horses wandered about the valley enjoying the rest and the juicy grass.

"Now, pard, I'll tell you just what my idea is," said the hunter, after the two had talked together for some time and Wild Bill had become more impressed than ever with his strange companion.

"I have every confidence that you will hit upon a good plan," answered Wild Bill, who had been most confidential with his host and had told him the story of Adrian Valdos's life and how he had been wronged by his brother and was then a captive of the red-skins awaiting a ransom that would set him free.

"I cannot understand who this renegade white chief is that they referred to, and it may be only a dodge of the Indians after all, for if there was a pale-face leader in the tribe I believe I would have known it."

"It would seem so."

"I have considerable influence with Red Heart, for he appears most friendly with me, and several times I know that he has taken my advice and not gone on the war-path when he had intended to do so."

"But this pale-face captive, the young girl, I cannot understand her presence there."

"I do know that I saw her, spoke a moment with her and that she is a beautiful young girl."

"Yet Red Heart never told me a word about her, and I asked him nothing."

"I do recall now that there was, some years ago, a renegade white chief in the tribe."

"He was really a gold-hunter, and played his card to be friendly with the Indians, giving them presents of firearms and leading them on raids against the settlements in which they were always successful in securing scalps, horses and booty."

"But he has an immense hold upon the Indians."

"Why the fellow, on one of his raids to a settlement, actually stole a small saw-mill on wheels and brought it back to the Indian country with him, and you have no idea the power it gave him over the red-skins, when he, being an engineer, set the machine to work and sawed out logs and boards for a house for himself."

"He built a grand council tepee for the Indians, and did much to help them live with more comfort in various ways."

"His tree tepee, as the Indians call his house, still stands in the valley, and it was there that I saw the young girl, so he may have come back after all, and perhaps he brought her with him."

"It must be so; but what can she be to him that he should bring her to live in an Indian camp?"

"Heaven only knows; but he is a wretch of the vilest kind, and hesitates at nothing."

"If he has actually returned we will find it no easy matter to rescue the girl, or your friend either, the lieutenant."

"We can try at least; but what is your plan, Pard Craft?"

"It is that we leave here day after to-morrow and go to the Indian village."

"We must go on foot, so no trails will be left if we have to escape in a hurry."

"That is right."

"This cabin of the renegade I spoke of stands apart from the village, in fact near a number of tepees in which an epidemic swept off a large number of Indians a few months ago."

"Whole families died, and in fact that part of the village was almost depopulated."

"When the epidemic had run out, the Indians moved those who had not died out of that end of the village, and there the tepees still stand empty, or did when I saw them last, and I suppose they will not be disturbed until cold weather comes on."

"But the cabin is there, and whether the renegade still lives in it or not now, if he has returned, the young girl certainly was there, for my trail led by it and she was in a net hammock swung upon the piazza."

"Your renegade had all the luxuries it seems."

"Indeed he did, for he stole, in his raids, all that he could to make himself comfortable."

"We will go to this cabin?"

"You will, for you must go alone, as, if you are captured, I can save you only by not being thought your friend."

"I see."

"I will show you the cabin, and tell you just how the village is located, and then I will go back to my animals, make a flank movement, and approach the camp from the other direction."

"You say go back to your animals?"

"Yes, for I will take with me the bears, lions, wild-cats, some of the wolves and birds."

"In Heaven's name, what for?"

"To make an impression upon the Indians, for I will entertain them at one end of the village, while you are reconnoitering at the other."

"Ah! I see."

"If you find the renegade, then it is a case of life and death with you, for you must kill him or he will you."

"I understand."

"If you find only the girl, then take her with you, strike back on our trail and come to my cabin here, for here you will be safe."

"And you?"

"I'll find out about your officer friend, and discover in just what way I can get him out of the clutches of the red-skins."

"If I have to kill the renegade chief?"

"All right, in going you will leave no trail, and I'll guarantee the Indians will not pursue you, for I'll return home over that same trail with my pets."

"That will settle it if they feel as I do; but I leave all in your hands, pard, for I have perfect confidence in your ability to plan and execute as well."

CHAPTER LXII.

THE RESCUERS AT WORK.

WILD BILL was not, as he expressed it, wedded to walking, but he could walk fast and far if it had to be done, and he set off with no complaints, with the hunter, on the trail to the Indian village of Red Heart.

They carried cooked provisions with them for an emergency, and the hunter had the animals follow them, so as to destroy all trace of any human tracks.

The two grizzly bears, the mountain lions, wild-cats, wolves and birds, looked like an ill-omened lot as they went along the trail.

Keeping up a steady pace and starting early, the sun was yet several hours high when, having left his animals in the trail, the hunter led the way to a ledge and pointed out the distant village, and with the cabin of the renegade chief distinctly visible at one end of it.

"There are the deserted tepees still standing, I see, and not a soul is visible in that end of the

Indian village, so you will be all right," said the hunter.

Wild Bill had turned his field-glass upon the distant village, and said:

"Yes, the village is deserted, but I see on the cabin two persons, one of whom is seated in a hammock."

"I can only tell that they are both pale-faces."

"Then that means that the renegade chief is back there, and you will have him to deal with."

"Go up the hill yonder, approach the cabin on the right and in the rear, and when you hear my pets at work in the other end of the village, slip around and cover the renegade."

"If you have to shoot, the rumpus of my pets will drown the sound."

"I should think so; but if I fail to get the girl?"

"Meet me here, for this is the way I will return, and keep in hiding until I come, or go on to the cabin, just as you please, but especially go if you have the girl."

"I will do as you say."

"Don't spring upon the renegade until you hear my pets, though, for they'll start off like a brass band, with growls, whines, howls, yelps and hoots, when I give the words, and that is what I intend shall please the Indians."

"It ought to do so, if they are all up a tree; but I'll wait here until I see you well on the way."

The scout remained on the ledge until he saw the hunter and his pets come out of the timber, cross the valley and mount the hill toward the other end of the village. Then he took the course pointed out to him and walked rapidly along on his way.

He had his rifle slung at his back, his revolvers ready for instant use, and went along with utter fearlessness, like a man who was aware of the danger he was to meet yet was fully able to take care of himself.

He was half an hour or more climbing up the hill to the ridge, which ended not far from the cabin.

He came out in the rear of the cabin, and not far from it, and was surprised to find there a house such as he then beheld, for it was built of sawed logs and boards, as the hunter had said, even the piazza running along its front being floored.

He had an open space to cross before reaching the cabin, yet felt that he must make the venture.

There was an Indian burying-ground in full view, not far away, doubtless where the victims of the epidemic had been buried, and the village was as quiet as was the last resting-place of the dead.

The tepees were there, but about them not a soul was visible.

Beyond, in the adjoining village, or rather rows of tepees, about an eighth of a mile away, he heard the sound of voices, the barking of a dog and an occasional shout.

Creeping down to the side of the cabin, he kept close to it and heard voices around in the front.

It was evidently the two whom he had seen upon the piazza through his glass.

He was unable to hear what was said, but knew that one was a man's voice, the other a woman's.

"The renegade chief is surely back again."

"I only hope there is no one else there than he and the girl, or within call."

"What if the girl does not wish to be rescued, and refuses to go with me?"

"Well, I'll be in a pretty tight box, that is all."

"I guess it's nearly time for the hunter to get around with his animal band, so I must be ready to act."

"Ah! hear those shouts—he is there now, frightening the squaws and papposes into fits, and starting the braves too upon a foot-race."

Thus mused the scout, and as he heard a distant howl, then a roar, he nerved himself for the work before him.

He would dash around the corner of the cabin, a revolver in each hand, halt and cover the two persons he found there.

If one was the renegade chief and he showed fight, then he would drop him dead with a shot.

So deciding the scout drew his revolvers from his belt, looked at them tenderly, as though he fully realized all that they were to him, and, leaning his rifle against the end of the cabin, stood ready to make his spring.

Louder and more frequent were the sounds heard in the distant Indian village, for cries of women and children were heard, with the shouts of warriors, and the whines of the Hunter's pets, until suddenly in one grand chorus there broke forth the most discordant serenade that was ever heard.

With a bound Wild Bill was around the end of the cabin, his revolvers leveled, covering the two whom he found there.

CHAPTER LXIII.

A DOUBLE SURPRISE.

WHEN Wild Bill made his rush to the front of the cabin, and leveled his revolvers, he stood like one at bay, looking the picture of magnificent

courage, a man who had put life at stake to gain an end.

With the leveling of his weapons he had said sternly:

"Hands up, both of you!"

Of course he knew one was a woman.

But was that woman friendly to him, or a foe?

He must be upon the safe side.

What he beheld was a striking picture indeed, one that he never forgot.

He saw a young girl, scarcely over sixteen, and, as the Hunter had said, very beautiful.

She looked like a child-woman with a bright, innocent face, yet womanly.

Her hair was like strands of yellow gold, and clustered about her forehead and neck, while her eyes were large, like deer-eyes, wondering and black, and sheltered by long curving lashes.

Teeth as white as milk, features perfect, a sun-bronzed complexion and a perfect form Wild Bill saw at a glance.

She was dressed in a suit of buckskin and furs, the skirt cut short, and leggings and gaiter-like moccasins.

Upon her head was a slouch hat that was most becoming to her, and altogether she was one to see and never forget.

At sight of the scout she had sprung toward the door, but halted and turned at his words.

Her companion was a man as striking in appearance as she was.

He was tall, elegantly formed, wiry and strong.

He wore a buckskin hunting-coat, leggings, and a belt of arms.

But his hat and weapons lay in a chair near a network hammock that was stretched across one end of the piazza and from which the girl had just risen.

The man's face was beardless, his black hair worn long, but it was a face which having seen Wild Bill could not forget, and he recognized who it was before him before he heard the words:

"My God! Wild Bill you here?"

"Dick Dash!" exclaimed the scout.

"It is an intense surprise to find you here."

"But why have you come here, Hickok?"

"I might ask you the same question, yet will answer that I came here to rescue that young girl, believing her to be a captive of the red-skins."

"What, my sister?"

"Your sister, Dick Doom?"

"Yes, for she is my sister, the only tie I have that now binds me to earth."

"Yes, she is a captive, and yet not really a captive either; but come, you are in deadly danger here, for Indians may come this way at any moment."

"I have the means of saving both you and your sister if you will come with me."

"Wild Bill, I am no captive, and yet I suppose in a certain sense I am."

"Come in, though, for you must not be seen, for that would mean your death."

"Come where you will be safe and then we can explain this double mystery."

"My rifle is there, and I will get it."

"Are you alone?"

"Yes, here."

The Desperado Duelist stepped to the corner, picked up the rifle and led Wild Bill into the cabin.

"Keep watch, Flo, for I wish to talk with my friend here."

"Call if any one comes, for I must put him in hiding."

"I will, brother," was the young girl's answer, she speaking for the first time.

"Sit there, Wild Bill, for here you are safe, and tell me just why you are here?"

"Do you not think you first owe me that explanation of why you were here, for I told you that I came to rescue that young girl?"

"I will tell you frankly, though it's a long story."

"You got my letter, or rather notice left on my cabin door?"

"Yes, and thank you."

"Of course I was set down as a coward?"

"Some thought so, but I went up to The Exchange and told them that the man who called you a coward I would deal with, and no one thought enough about it to stick to their opinions."

"And the miner and the young ladies?"

"Had only words of praise for you."

"I gave one of your horses to Miss Marcellite, another to Miss Sue, kept the other and have him with me now, while I kept some of your trinkets and gave the gold and Red Hand's riches to the poor and sick miners of Mascot City."

"It was just like you."

"Then you came here?"

"After a few days I did, for I met one who told me there was a young white girl here a captive, and I hoped to be able to rescue her."

"Ever daring, yet it looks like madness for you to attempt it, to come here for one you had never seen."

"You heard in Mascot City of how we left a lieutenant as a hostage in the hands of the red-skins?"

"Yes, I heard so."

"Well, I hoped to be able to rescue him also."

"Now tell me how it is I find you here, the friend of the red-skins, for you are as free as the air."

"It is a long story, Wild Bill, and a sad one; but I will tell you it, for it is your right to know."

"Once we were foes, for it was forced upon me to be such toward you, but now we are friends, and I would offer my life to save you, and you are in the deadliest of danger."

CHAPTER LXIV.

THE MYSTERY OF A LIFE.

A LOOK of extreme sadness had crossed the face of the young Border Duelist, when he spoke of explaining to Wild Bill why he was there in an Indian village, not as a captive apparently but as a friend.

"Wild Bill," he said suddenly, after a moment of thought wondering how to begin.

"You saw me in a very cruel light at Mascot City."

"You knew me as a man of education, gentlemanly exterior, one who should have been leading a different life."

"You saw in me a gambler, one who played alone for gain, and one who was known as the Desperado Duelist."

"Well, appearances were terribly against me, I admit, and yet I will tell you what made me what I was, what I am."

"I was born in New York State, of rich parents, and my family was an old and aristocratic one."

"I was appointed to West Point, and as a cadet there stood high in my class for two years, when I was dismissed for another's crime."

"My father had died when I was but fifteen, leaving my mother a large fortune, and myself and a sister, years my junior, her only children."

"I was surprised, when at West Point, to learn that my mother intended to marry again, and I wrote a very strong letter home against it, and it was soon after that I was dismissed."

"My mother did marry, and her husband moved West, but I would not go to my home, and went to the mines in Mexico to try and make my fortune unaided, for I was then nearly twenty."

"I was doing fairly well, after a year's stay there, when a letter from my little sister begged me to come at once to her, that it was most urgent."

"I obeyed the summons, and started for the home of my mother, which was then near Denver, on a ranch."

"Do you know what it is to feel that all you love has been cruelly taken from you by man's inhumanity?"

"If so, you can understand how I suffered when I reached the ranch to find that it had been raided but a short while before, my mother killed, my sister murdered and my step-father carried off into captivity by the outlaw raiders, to force from him a large ransom."

"Wild Bill, I nearly lost my mind from the shock, and at first I was helpless; but at last I rallied, vowed vengeance, and set off to avenge those I loved."

"I found out who the raiders were, and got the names of all in the band from one who knew."

"But, alas! while on the search for them, I was captured by a band of Sioux, under a renegade white chief."

"I fought desperately, but they surprised me, and the renegade saved my life, claiming that I was his son."

"I was taken by the Indians back to their village, this is the very spot, where, to my surprise, I found the renegade chief dwelling in this house, which was half-full of booty, the result of his raids."

"He was a remarkable man, having it in his power to play the gentleman or the cut-throat at his will."

"I remained here for a year, when he left the Indians, I accompanying him."

"It was in the Colorado mines that I took to gambling, for I was an expert in handling cards, and one night a man accused me of cheating."

"I was never guilty in my life of doing so, and I resented it by knocking him down."

"He drew his revolver to kill me, but I was too quick for him and gave him a mortal wound."

"That man I cared for until he died, and from his lips I learned that he was one of the outlaws who had gone to my mother's home."

"She had been killed, but my sister had not, but instead was kidnapped."

"And more I learned, that my mother's old servants who had gone West with her, were all put to death and for a purpose."

"That purpose was for gold, for the man who had been the murderer was my step-father."

"I had never seen him, and so did not know him."

"My father's will read that in case of the death of either my mother, my sister or myself, the share of property was to revert to the others."

"In case of the death of my sister and myself, my mother could get all, and could will her estate to whom she pleased."

"The estate was worth a million dollars, and the man who became my mother's second husband worked to get sole control of it, and was even then a married man."

"He had been secretly married to the girl he loved, and she had allowed him to thus deceive my mother to in the end get riches, for his plan was to get rid of my sister and myself, then my mother and so secure all."

"It was he who got me dismissed from West Point, and he it was who, the leader of a gang of road-agents, had raided his own home, putting my mother and the servants to death, and saving my sister only because the dying man, whose confession I heard, and who was his accomplice, threatened to betray him if he did not save her."

"So he spared her and sent her to San Francisco to school, while he continued his life of outlawry, as to get the estate he must prove my sister and myself dead."

"So it was that he, unknown to me, and I known to him, kept me in the Indian village, for some reason not daring to kill me."

"When I had heard all from the dying man, I went in search of the man whose life I intended to take."

"He had overheard the confession and fled."

"From the outlaw I learned the names of all those against whom I had vowed vengeance, and where I would most likely find them."

"I first went to the school in California, and there found more of that man's devilry, for he bribed the one in whose charge he had left her, to tell me that she was dead."

"I believed her, so mourned my sister once more as dead, while he had taken her away."

"Then it was that I started upon the trail of revenge, and it was in Moonlight Valley that I tracked down and killed seven of those whose hands were stained by my mother's life."

"I went about the work deliberately, yet risked my life in each case to take theirs, and the day before you came I killed the last one, save the leader, though it took years to track them all and made a fiend of me, I admit."

"When I left Moonlight Valley I seemed guided by good fortune, for I met on the trail my step-father."

"We recognized each other at the same instant, and he shot to kill, I shot to wound him."

"He fell, mortally wounded, but I forced from him a full confession of his crimes, and then came the truth that my sister yet lived, and only a few weeks ago he had taken her to the Indian village over which he was known as the Renegade Chief."

"I made him sign a confession, I have it here, and waiting by him until he died, I left him as food for coyotes and came at once here."

"The Indians knew me as the Renegade Chief's son, and believing me their friend, I was welcomed by them."

"Here, a captive really, yet known as the renegade's daughter, I found my sister, and told her all the sad, cruel story."

"Now you know it too, Wild Bill."

CHAPTER LXV.

THE ESCAPE.

WHEN Dick Dash had finished his painful recitation of a life of wrong and crime, Buffalo Bill held out his hand and said warmly:

"My dear Dash, I sympathize with you from the bottom of my heart, and we will be friends for life."

"But my name is Richard Dashwood, and my sister's name is Flora."

"She is now sixteen, just eight years my junior, for I am old in experience though young in age, and I look past thirty, for sorrow, care and suffering have left their imprint as you see."

"But, as Flo has given no word of warning I will call her, for a few minutes at least, and she shall know that you are the one of whom I have told her so much."

"She knows my life in all its cruel career, and she has forgiven for she felt I had justice on my side."

"Three months ago she was taken from boarding-school in Chicago, and brought here, for she never knew our step-father as he is."

"He left her here, promising to return for her, as he pretended to be hunting gold in the mountains, but he left her to be in the end sacrificed as the wife of Red Heart, the chief."

"My God! he deserved a worse fate than he met, for brave men, good men, often die by the bullet."

"Poor child, she did not suspect it, but Red Heart spoke to me about it, and horrified as I was, I had to pretend acquiescence to be able to plot for time, and we were plotting an escape together when you came."

"Thank Heaven I came, for it is in my power to rescue you both."

"And I thank Heaven too, but it must be soon, for to be retaken would mean death to you and me and a worse fate for Flo."

"I understand that, but there will be no mistakes."

"You know she is trusted perfectly, as I am,

being considered the renegade's son and daughter, yet Red Heart guards us with watchful eyes."

"I have no doubt of that."

"But I am not here alone in my undertaking, for there is one now in the Indian village whom the red-skins also regard as their friend, and he is here to help me."

"You may know him, as the Wolf Chief, or White Hermit."

"Ah yes, I have heard the Indians speak of him, and Flo saw him some weeks ago, and wanted to ask him to aid her to escape, for she dreaded her life here, yet she dared not do so."

"It was he who told me of her being here, and of the Renegade Chief, for whom I mistook you at first."

"Well, I believe you will lead us both to freedom, and I only wish we could save one other who is here."

"And who is that?"

"An army officer, and now I think of it, he must be your friend the lieutenant."

"He has been a prisoner here for several weeks, but Red Heart is very quiet about him, and I have not seen him even, but Flo has something to tell me about him, she said."

Dick Dashwood then called to his sister who came into the cabin with a smile, and was told in a few words the visitor was Wild Bill of whom her brother had told her."

She greeted the scout in a way that quite won his heart, and tears came into her beautiful eyes when her brother told her that Wild Bill was there to rescue her."

"Now, Flo, what is it you were going to tell me about that army officer prisoner you spoke of?"

"Oh, yes, poor fellow, he was brought here by order of a cruel brother, his twin-brother."

"What?" asked Wild Bill, in a tone that startled the girl.

"I'll tell you what I heard, sir."

"It seems that one of the brothers is a bad man, for he is a renegade and the friend of Red Heart."

"He was also in the army, I guess, for he led some soldiers into a trap, and making signs the Indians understood, came into their lines and Red Heart treats him as though he was really a brother."

"He came back here with them, and soon after went off with a band of braves on a raid."

"I saw them when they came back, and they had a prisoner in uniform, the very image of the renegade leader."

"It was his twin-brother, and he told Red Heart to hold him prisoner, and then away went the wicked brother again with more braves."

"Where is he now?"

"He has not been back since, and he told the chief that he was going to plan to get scalps and booty for him."

"And the brother?"

"Is still a prisoner, poor fellow, and I only wish you could rescue him, too."

"We will have to do it, Miss Flora."

"Do you think, pard, you could get him out of prison to-night?"

"Oh, yes, for there is but one guard over him, and he is bound, you know."

"I could kill the Indian, have a red-skin's rig with me, and bring him over here."

"Good! Do you see yonder ledge?"

"Yes."

"I will be there, for there will the old hunter come."

"I will meet him and keep him there, and as soon as you can release the prisoner come there with him and your sister."

"If you do not come I will know you have failed and the hunter and I will arrange some other plan of escape."

"We will be there, for I can see no reason for failure, as both Flo and I are trusted, and she even has talked to the prisoner."

"Then, Miss Flo, go there again and try and tell him to expect a rescue to-night, so he will be prepared."

"I will, sir, and I can," was the answer.

After a few minutes' longer conversation, in which they went over their plan again, Wild Bill slipped out of the cabin, ran down the hill into the timber, and made his way back to the spot where he was to meet the hunter."

It was nearing nightfall when he returned, and was glad to see the hunter coming up the valley with his pelts."

Night fell just as the Hermit reached the spot and Wild Bill called out:

"Muzzle your menagerie, old man, for I am here."

"Good! and the girl?"

"I will tell you all about her, for we have a couple of hours to await here."

"Keep your eye over across the valley at the cabin, and if you see a light cross the window three times then you will know that all goes well."

"Now what did you find out in the village?"

"Oh! but I had a picnic with the squaws and papposes, and the braves too; but I saw Red Heart, kept the red-skins busy watching my animals, and learned that there is another prisoner there."

"Yes, Lieutenant Valdos. I have something

to tell you of him, and he will escape to-night with the young girl."

"Good! He speaks Spanish, I found, so I told him in that language that I would soon have him out of that, and I meant to, but you have gotten ahead of me and without delay."

"Now, pard, tell me who you found and what you did?"

In a few words as possible Wild Bill told the Hermit just what he had discovered, and that he hoped within a short while to have Dick Dashwood, his sister and the officer join them on the ledge.

It was just as he finished his story that both saw a light pass across the window of the renegade's cabin three times, and that told them all was well.

Half an hour after Wild Bill met three persons coming up the ledge. They proved to be Dashwood, Flora and Lieutenant Valdos.

There was no time to talk; so these men hurried on, met the Hermit, and all started for the lone cabin, going ahead of the animals, whose coming behind destroyed any trail they might leave.

The cabin was reached before dawn; the six horses there were quickly saddled, and, without rest, the party mounted and started on the trail southward before the sun had risen, for it was decided that delay might be fatal.

CHAPTER LXVI.

AT LAST.

FLORA DASHWOOD had stood the long walk well. She had not seemed to suffer with fatigue, and declined the arm of her brother and Wild Bill.

Cramped by his being bound, it was harder walking for Adrian Valdos, but he was assisted from time to time by the others.

Wild Bill congratulated himself over and over again upon his good fortune in having been ambushed on the way northward, as it secured for him the horses of the outlaws who had attempted to assassinate him.

With the party there were just five persons, so there was an extra horse for a pack-animal.

Flora and the lieutenant had been left at the entrance to the canyon, over a mile from the cabin, so that they had secured an hour's good rest, while the others went on and caught the horses, made the pack ready, of bedding and provisions, and prepared for the trail of escape.

The old hunter was greatly moved at parting from his pets. He left the cabin open, and the bars down, but would not allow them to follow him.

"They will go out and care for themselves when they find I am really gone and they get hungry," he said.

Having come up with Flo and the lieutenant, they, too, at once mounted, and the party set off at a brisk pace, for they were anxious to get as far ahead of pursuit as possible.

Of course, when the dead Indian guard was found, there would be an alarm, the prisoner's escape would be discovered, and then the flight of the brother and sister.

It would be assumed that the hunter had aided them, but, as no trail would be found, no horses stolen, they would be at a loss what to do, for several hours, and all that time the fugitives would be placing more miles behind them and danger.

And so it was; for the evening of the second day the fugitive party camped on the trail to Fort Blank, several miles from the spot appointed to meet the red-skins who promised to bring Lieutenant Valdos there and get the ransom money.

Leaving the lieutenant, Flo and Dick Dashwood to rest in camp, Wild Bill and the trapper went out to reconnoiter, and what was the delight of the scout when he saw a cavalcade in the distance, which his glass quickly told him was Miner Turpin and his party!

Quickly they went out and on to meet them, and the joy of both was mutual when all recognized the daring and devoted scout.

They had come upon the outlaws' graves, and from that time had been more than ever anxious about Wild Bill.

But, he led them off the main trail, to the little camp where his party were in waiting, and on the way told them how the trapper had aided him in the rescue, and who it was they would find in the camp, while he hinted something to the miner and the young ladies of the story of Dick Dashwood's life.

The decision, upon reaching camp, was that they would remain there and wait until Wild Bill kept his pledge, on the following day, to have the ransom money ready to pay for the return of the officer.

And Adrian Valdos had told his story—of how he had really met his brother at the grave of the soldiers, had trusted his protestations of reform, and then had been treacherously drugged at his supper and returned to consciousness to find himself in the power of a band of Indians led by Elmer Valdos, and was taken to the village of Red Heart as a prisoner.

And the thrice cruel, treacherous brother?

With no doubt that he would be recognized as

Adrian Valdos, and having heard the whole story his brother had to tell, and thus being prepared to play his part well, he had gone to the rendezvous, met the ladies and their escort, deceiving even Wild Bill, and having the Indians follow them, had played the self-sacrificing hero and planned to get ten thousand dollars in ransom for his own return from captivity!

The deep scheme of devilry could hardly be imagined, let alone believed, and Adrian Valdos said that he would not raise a hand again to protect his wicked brother from the gallows.

So it was that, during the next day, Wild Bill went to the rendezvous, accompanied by Kit Carrol and the sergeant. Soon after their arrival the Indians came in sight, with the outlaw riding between them as though he was prisoner.

It was his intention to have the money given to the Indians, and once he was free, to return to a spot he had appointed to meet them that night, and so secure the gold for a few presents he would give them in return.

Nearer and nearer they advanced, and as they at last confronted Wild Bill and his party, not ten paces apart, the pretended officer said:

"I hope you have the money, Wild Bill, for they have a large force of braves not far away, and I have been made to suffer greatly."

"No, I have not the gold. I have come to get you, dead or alive, Elmer Valdos."

A cry broke from the lips of the outlaw, and he called quickly to the Indians to fly.

But, too late!

Wild Bill's revolver cracked and Elmer Valdos, the Outlaw Chief and Renegade, fell dead from his horse, a bullet having struck him just between the eyes.

In terror the Indians turned and fled, but no shots were fired at them, and they soon disappeared from sight.

"The villain is dead at last—I'll swear to that, said Wild Bill, quickly, as he dismounted and knelt by the side of the fallen outlaw.

"Sergeant, go to camp and bring back four men, with a pick and spades. Kit and I will wait here."

The sergeant rode off at full speed, and, half an hour after, returned with the men. A grave was quickly dug and Elmer Valdos placed in his last earthly resting-place.

"We had to kill him, sir; there was no help for it. Here is what I took from his body, all that he took from you. There is quite a force of Indians over in the valley, sir, so had we not best push on for the fort?"

So said Wild Bill to Lieutenant Adrian Valdos, on his return to camp.

"Yes; we will move at once."

"It was better as it was, that he should die as he did, and I thank you, Wild Bill, my good pard. Yes, the end has come at last, and I thank you."

This was the reply of Adrian Valdos, and for a moment he showed how deeply he felt.

Then he cast off the feeling upon him, placed himself at the head of the command, and moved briskly on toward the fort, for he had precious lives to guard he well knew.

The next day the little command filed into the fort, and loud and long were the welcoming cheers for the gallant band.

CONCLUSION.

THE story was told, as much as was necessary, of the double treachery again of Elmer Valdos, and of all that had followed it.

Then, too, the doings in Moonlight Valley became known, and Wild Bill was lauded as a hero by all, for he had justly won the claim to the title and the honor.

The deserters were turned over to the proper officials for trial, while James Jessop was, as Wild Bill had promised, allowed to serve out his term in the army and gain a pardon for his past crimes.

About Dick Dashwood little more was told than that he had been searching for his sister, who had been a captive of the Indians, and they expressed their wish to go East at the earliest opportunity possible, though all hated to see Flo go, as she had won many hearts during her stay at the fort.

When they did start East, they were accompanied by Miner Turpin and his daughter, and Sanderson Craft, the trapper.

While Dick Dashwood went to see their mother's attorneys in New York, and found no trouble in securing possession of their estate, Mr. Turpin and Sue purchased a lovely house near New York and settled down to a life of rest and happiness—the young lady having all she could do to prepare for her marriage in a few months to Major Vernon Canfield.

Sanderson Craft did return to his old home and found that he was a very rich man.

And more: he discovered that the woman he had so devotedly loved was still a widow.

As soon as he could arrange for the sale of his property he did so, and going North one day he called upon the woman whom he had made a widow.

"Forgive me!" he had faltered when they met.

"You had just cause, for I know all," was her reply.

"Then let no haunting specters keep us apart, but say that you will be my wife!" he urged.

Her answer was spoken in a low tone:

"Yes, let the dead past bury its dead."

And so these two at last knew happiness after a life of much sorrow and bitterness.

When at last Major Canfield came East to claim his beautiful bride, he was accompanied by Adrian Valdos and his wife—*nee* Marcelite Monastery.

Valdos had resigned his commission in the army, and was content to leave the dangers of Wild West life forever and live for his wife alone.

They became the guests of Millionaire Turpin and were happy in seeing Sue made the bride of one she so devotedly loved.

Dick Dashwood and Flora were also there, but no one suspected the cruel romance of his strange life—a life that would have forever set in gloom but for the splendid nerve and devotion of Wild Bill.

THE END.

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